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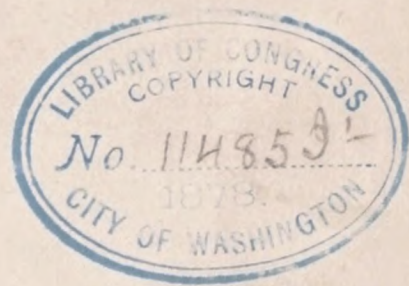
"HE STEPPED FORWARD WITH A SMILE."—Page 11.

"FOR PERCIVAL."

A NOVEL.

By
Margaret Veley

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.



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“FOR PERCIVAL.”

CHAPTER I. THORNS AND ROSES.



IT was a long, narrow and rather low room, with four windows looking out on a terrace. Jasmine and roses clustered round them, and flowers lifted their heads to the broad sills. Within, the

lighted candles showed furniture that was perhaps a little faded and dim, though it had a slender, old-fashioned grace which more than made amends for any beauty it had lost. There was much old china, and on the walls were a few family portraits, of which their owner was justly proud; and in the air there lingered a faint fragrance of dried rose-leaves, delicate yet unconquerable. Even the full tide of midsummer sweetness which flowed through the open windows could not altogether overcome that subtle memory of summers long gone by.

The master of the house, with a face like a wrinkled waxen mask, sat in his easy-chair reading the *Saturday Review*,

and a lady very like him, only with a little more color and fulness, was knitting close by. The light shone on the old man's pale face and white hair, on the old lady's silver-gray dress and flashing rings: the knitting-pins clicked, working up the crimson wool, and the pages of the paper rustled with a pleasant crispness as they were turned. By the window, where the candlelight faded into the soft shadows, stood a young man apparently lost in thought. His face, which was turned a little toward the garden, was a noteworthy one with its straight forehead and clearly marked, level brows. His features were good, and his clear olive complexion gave him something of a foreign air. He had no beard, and his moustache was only a dark shadow on his upper lip, so that his mouth stood revealed as one which indicated reserve, though it was neither stern nor thin-lipped. Altogether, it was a pleasant face.

A light step sauntering along the terrace, a low voice softly singing "Drink to Me only with Thine Eyes," roused him from his reverie. He did not move, but his mouth and eyes relaxed into a smile as a white figure came out of the dusk exactly opposite his window, and singer and song stopped together. "Oh, Percival! I didn't know you had come out of the dining-room."

"Twenty minutes ago. What have you been doing?"

"Wandering about the garden. What could I do on such a perfect night but

what I have been doing all this perfect day?"

She stood looking up at him as she spoke. She had an arch, beautiful face—the sort of face which would look well with patches and powder. Only it would have been a sin to powder the hair, which, though deep brown, had rich touches of gold, as if a happy sunbeam were imprisoned in its waves. Her eyes were dark, her lips were softly red: everything about Sissy Langton's face was delicate and fine. She lifted her hand to reach a spray of jasmine just above her head, and the lace sleeve above fell back from her pretty, slender wrist: "Give it to me. Percival! do you hear? Oh, what a tease you are!" For he drew it back when she would have gathered it. Mrs. Middleton was heard making a remark inside.

"You don't deserve it," said Percival. "Here is my aunt saying that the hot weather makes you scandalously idle."

"Scandalously idle! Aunt Harriet!" Sissy repeated it in incredulous amusement, and the old lady's indignant disclaimer was heard: "Percival! Most unusually idle, I said."

"Oh! most unusually idle? I beg your pardon. But doesn't that imply a considerable amount of idleness to be got through by one person?"

"Yes, but you helped me," said Sissy.—"Aunt Harriet, listen. He stood on my thimble ever so long while he was talking this afternoon. How can I work without a thimble?"

"Impossible!" said Percival. "And I don't think I can get you another tomorrow: I am going out. On Thursday I shall come back and bring you one that won't fit. Friday you must go with me to change it. Yes, we shall manage three days' holiday very nicely."

"Nonsense! But it *is* your fault if I am idle."

"Why, yes. Having no thimble, you are naturally unable to finish your book, for instance."

"Oh, I sha'n't finish that: I don't like it. The heroine is so dreadfully strong-minded I don't believe in her. She never

does anything wrong; and through she suffers tortures—absolute agony, you know—she always rises to the occasion—nasty thing!"

"A wonderful woman," said Percival, idly picking sprays of jasmine as he spoke.

Sissy's voice sank lower: "Do you think there are really any women like that?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so."

She took the flowers which he held out, and looked doubtfully into his face: "But—do you *like* them, Percival?"

"Make the question a little clearer," he said. "I don't like your ranting, pushing, unwomanly women who can talk of nothing but their rights. They are very terrible. But heroic women—" He stopped short. The pause was more eloquent than speech.

"Ah!" said Sissy. "Well—a woman like Jael? or Judith?"

He repeated the name "Judith." "Or Charlotte Corday?" he suggested after a moment.

It was Sissy's turn to hesitate, and she compressed her pretty lips doubtfully. Being in the Old Testament, Jael must of course come out all right, even if one finds it difficult to like her. Judith's position is less clear. Still, it is a great thing to be in the Apocrypha, and then living so long ago and so far away makes a difference. But Charlotte Corday—a young Frenchwoman, not a century dead, who murdered a man, and was guillotined in those horrible revolutionary times,—would Percival say *that* was the type of woman he liked?

"Well—Charlotte Corday, then?"

"Yes, I admire her," he said slowly. "Though I would rather the heroism did not show itself in bloodshed. Still, she was noble: I honor her. I dare say the others were too, but I don't know so much about them."

"What a poor little thing you must think me!" said Sissy. "I could never do anything heroic."

"Why not?"

"I should be frightened. I can't bear people to be angry with me. I should run away, or do something silly."

"Then I hope you won't be tried," said Percival.

She shook her pretty head: "People always talk about casting gold into the furnace, and it's coming out only the brighter and better. Things are not good for much if you would rather they were not tried."

Her hand was on the window-frame as she spoke, and the young man touched a ring she wore: "Gold is tried in the furnace—yes, but not your pearls. Besides, I'm not so sure that you would fail if you were put to the test."

She smiled, well pleased, yet unconvinced.

"You think," he went on, "that people who did great deeds did them without an effort—were always ready, like a bow always strung? No, no, Sissy: they felt very weak sometimes. Isn't there anything in the world you think you could die for? Even if you say 'No' now, there may be something one of these days."

The twilight hid the soft glow which overspread her face. "Anything in the world you could die for?" Anything? Anybody? Her blood flowed in a strong, courageous current as her heart made answer, "Yes—for one."

But she did not speak, and after a moment her companion changed the subject. "That's a pretty ring," he said.

Sissy started from her reverie: "Horace gave it me. Adieu, Mr. Percival Thorne: I'm going to look at my roses."

"Thank you. Yes, I shall be delighted to come." And Percival jumped out. "Don't look at me as if I'd said something foolish. Isn't that the right way to answer your kind invitation?"

"Invitation! What next?" demanded Sissy with pretty scorn. And the pair went off together along the terrace and into the fragrant dusk.

A minute later it occurred to Mrs. Middleton to fear that Sissy might take cold, and she went to the window to look after her. But, as no one was to be seen, she turned away and encountered her brother, who had been watching them too. "Do they care for each other?" he asked abruptly.

"How can I tell?" Mrs. Middleton replied. "Of course she is fond of him in a way, but I can't help fancying sometimes that Horace—"

"Horace!" Mr. Thorne's smile was singularly bland. "Oh, indeed! Horace—a charming arrangement! Pray how many more times is Mr. Horace to supplant that poor boy?" His soft voice changed suddenly, as one might draw a sword from its sheath. "Horace had better not cross Percival's path, or he will have to deal with me. Is he not content? What next must he have?"

Mrs. Middleton paused. She could have answered him. There was an obvious reply, but it was too crushing to be used, and Mr. Thorne braved it accordingly.

"Better leave your grandsons alone, Godfrey," she said at last, "if you'll take my advice; which I don't think you ever did yet. You'll only make mischief. And there is Sissy to be considered. Let the child choose for herself."

"And you think she can choose—Horace?"

"Why not?"

"Choose Horace rather than Percival?"

"I should," said the old lady with smiling audacity. "And I would rather she did. Horace's position is better."

Mr. Thorne uttered something akin to a grunt, which might by courtesy be taken for a groan: "Oh, how mercenary you women are! Well, if you marry a man for his money, Horace has the best of it—if he behaves himself. Yes, I admit that—if *he behaves himself*."

"And Horace is handsomer," said Mrs. Middleton with a smile.

"Pink-and-white prettiness!" scoffed Mr. Thorne.

"Nonsense!" The color mounted to the old lady's forehead, and she spoke sharply: "We didn't hear anything about that when he was a lad, and we were afraid of something amiss with his lungs: it would have been high treason to say a syllable against him then. And now, though I suppose he will always be a little delicate (you'd be sorry if you lost him, Godfrey), it's a shame to talk as if

the boys were not to be compared. They are just of a height, not half an inch difference, and the one as brave and manly as the other. Horace is fair, and Percival is dark; and you know, as well as I do, that Horace is the handsomer."

Mr. Thorne shifted his ground: "If I were Sissy I would choose my husband for qualities that are rather more than skin-deep."

"By all means. And still I would choose Horace."

"What is amiss with Percival?"

"He is not so frank and open. I don't want to say anything against him—I like Percival—but I wish he were not quite so reserved."

"What next?" said Mr. Thorne with a short laugh. "Why, only this morning you said he talked more than Horace."

"Talked? Oh yes, Percival can talk, and about himself too," said Mrs. Middleton with a smile. "But he can keep his secrets all the time. I don't want to say anything against him: I like him very much—"

"No doubt," said Mr. Thorne.

"But I don't feel quite sure that I know him. He isn't like Horace. You know Horace's friends—"

"Trust me for that."

"But what do you know of Percival's? I heard him tell Sissy he would be out to-morrow. Will you ever know where he went?"

"I sha'n't ask him."

"No," she retorted, "you dare not! Isn't it a rule that no one is ever to question Percival?"

"And while I'm master here it shall be obeyed. It's the least I can do. The boy shall come and go, speak or hold his tongue, as he pleases. No one shall cross him—Horace least of all—while I'm master here, Harriet; but that won't be very long."

"I don't want you to think any harm of Percival's silence," she answered gently. "I don't for one moment suppose he has any secrets to be ashamed of. I myself like people to be open, that is all."

"If I wanted to know anything Percival would tell me," said Mr. Thorne.

Mrs. Middleton's charity was great. She hid the smile she could not repress. "Well," she said, "perhaps I am not fair to Percival, but, Godfrey, you are not quite just to Horace."

He turned upon her: "Unjust to Horace? I?"

She knew what he meant. He had shown Horace signal favor, far above his cousin, yet what she had said was true. Perhaps some of the injustice had been in this very favor. "Here are our truants!" she exclaimed. She and her brother had not talked so confidentially for years, but the moment her eyes fell on Sissy her thoughts went back to the point at which Mr. Thorne had disturbed them: "My dearest Sissy, I am so afraid you will catch cold."

"It can't be done to-night," said Percival. "Won't you come and try?" But the old lady shook her head.

"All right, auntie! we won't stop out," said Sissy; and a moment later she made her appearance in the drawing-room with her hands full of roses, which she tossed carelessly on the table. Mr. Thorne had picked up his paper, and stood turning the pages and pretending to read, but she pushed it aside to put a rosebud in his coat.

"Roses are more fit for you young people than for an old fellow like me," he said. "Why don't you give one to Percival?"

She looked over her shoulder at young Thorne. "Do you want one?" she said.

He smiled, with a slight movement of his head and his dark eyes fixed on hers.

"Then, why didn't you pick one when we were out? Now, weren't you foolish? Well, never mind. What color?"

"Choose for him," said Mr. Thorne.

Sissy hesitated, looking from Percival's face to a bud of deepest crimson. Then, throwing it down, "No, you shall have yellow," she exclaimed: "Laura Falconer's complexion is something like yours, and she always wears yellow. As soon as one yellow dress is worn out she gets another."

"She is a most remarkable young woman if she waits till the first one is worn out," said Percival.

"Am I to put your rose in or not?" Sissy demanded.

He stepped forward with a smile, and looked darkly handsome as he stood there with Sissy putting the yellow rose in his coat and glancing archly up at him.

Mr. Thorne from behind his *Saturday Review* watched the girl who might, perhaps, hold his favorite's future in her hands. "Does he care for her?" he wondered. If he did, the old man felt that he would gladly have knelt to entreat her, "Be good to my poor Percival." But did Percival want her to be good to him? Godfrey Thorne was altogether in the dark about his grandson's wishes in the matter. He tried hard not to think that he was in the dark about every wish or hope of Percival's, and he looked up eagerly when the latter said something about going out the next day. He remembered which horse Percival liked, he assented to everything, but he watched him all the time with a wistful curiosity. He did not really care where Percival went, but he would have given much for such a word about his plans as would have proved to Harriet, and to himself too, that his boy *did* confide in him sometimes. It was not to be, however. Young Thorne had taken up the local paper and the subject dropped. Mr. Thorne may have guessed later, but he never knew where his roan horse went the next day.

CHAPTER II.

"THOSE EYES OF YOURS."

NOT five miles away that same evening a conversation was going on which would have interested Mrs. Middleton.

The scene was an up-stairs room in a pleasant house near the county town. Mrs. Blake, a woman of seven or eight and forty, handsome and well preserved, but of a high-colored type, leant back in an easy-chair lazily unfastening her bracelets, by way of signifying that she had begun to prepare for the night. Her two daughters were with her. Addie, the elder, was at the looking-glass brushing

her hair and half enveloped in its silky blackness. She was a tall, graceful girl, a refined likeness of her mother. On the rug lay Lottie, three years younger, hardly more than a growing girl, long-limbed, slight, a little abrupt and angular by her sister's side, her features not quite so regular, her face paler in its cloud of dark hair. Yet there was a look of determination and power which was wanting in Addie; and at times, when Lottie was roused, her eyes had a dark splendor which made her sister's beauty seem comparatively commonplace and tame.

Stretched at full length, she propped her chin on her hands and looked up at her mother. "I don't suppose you care," she said, in a clear, almost boyish voice.

"Not much," Mrs. Blake replied with a smile. "Especially as I rather doubt it."

Addie paused, brush in hand: "I really think you've made a mistake, Lottie."

"Do you really? I haven't, though," said that young lady decidedly.

"It can't be—surely," Addie hesitated, with a little shadow on her face.

"Of course no. Is it likely?" said Mrs. Blake, as if the discussion were closed.

"I tell you," said Lottie stubbornly, "Godfrey Hammond told me that Percival's father was the eldest son."

"But it is Horace who has always lived at Brackenhill. Percival only goes on a visit now and then. Every one knows," said Addie, in almost an injured tone, "that Horace is the heir."

Lottie raised her head a little and eyed her sister intently, with amusement, wonder, and a little scorn in her glance. Addie, blissfully unconscious, went on brushing her hair, still with that look of anxious perplexity.

"This is how it was," Lottie exclaimed suddenly. "Percival was just gone, and you were talking to Horace. Up comes Godfrey Hammond, sits down by me, and says some rubbish about consoling me. I think I laughed. Then he looked at me out of his little, light eyes, and said that you and I seemed to get on well with his young friends. So I said, 'Oh yes—middling.'"

"Upon my word," smiled Mrs. Blake, "you appear to have distinguished yourself in the conversation."

"Didn't I?" said Lottie, untroubled and unabashed: "I know it struck me so at the time. Then he said something—I forget how he put it—about our being just the right number and pairing off charmingly. So I said, 'Oh, of course the elder ones went together: that was only right.'"

"And what did he say?"

"Oh, he pinched his lips together and smiled, and said, 'Don't you know that Percival is the elder?'"

"But, Lottie, that proves nothing as to his father."

"Who supposed it did? I said 'Fiddlededee! I didn't mean that: I supposed they were much about the same age, or if Percy were a month or two older it made no difference. I meant that Horace was the eldest son's son, so of course he was A I.'"

"Well?" said Addie.

"Well, then he looked twice as pleased with himself as he did before, and said, 'I don't think Horace told you that. It so happens that Percival is not only the elder by a month or two, as you say, but he is the son of the eldest son.' Then I said 'Oh!' and mamma called me for something, and I went."

Mrs. Blake and Addie exchanged glances.

"Now, could I have made a mistake?" demanded Lottie.

"It seems plain enough, certainly," her mother allowed.

"Then, could Godfrey Hammond have made a mistake? Hasn't he known the Thornes all their lives? and didn't he say once that he was named Godfrey after their old grandfather?"

Mrs. Blake assented.

"Then," said the girl, relapsing into her recumbent position, "perhaps you'll believe me another time."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Blake: "we'll see when the other time comes. If it is as you say, it is curious." She rose as she spoke and went to the farther end of the room. As she stood by an open drawer putting away the ornaments which

she had taken off, the candlelight revealed a shadow of perplexity on her face which increased the likeness between herself and Addie. Apparently, Lottie was right as to her facts. The estate was not entailed, then, and despotic power seemed to be rather capriciously exercised by the head of the house. If Horace should displease his grandfather—if, for instance, he chose a wife of whom old Mr. Thorne did not approve—would his position be very secure? Mrs. Blake was uneasy, and felt that it was very wrong of people to play tricks with the succession to an estate like Brackenhill.

Meanwhile, Lottie watched her sister, who was thoughtfully drawing her fingers through her long hair. "Addie," she said, after a pause, "what will you do if Horace isn't the heir after all?"

"What a silly question! I sha'n't do anything: there's nothing for me to do."

"But shall you mind very much? You are very fond of Horace, aren't you?"

"Fond of him!" Addie repeated. "He is very pleasant to talk to, if you mean that."

"Oh, you can't deceive me so! I believe that you are in love with him," said Lottie solemnly.

The color rushed to Addie's face when her vaguely tender sentiments, indefinite as Horace's attentions, were described in this startling fashion. "Indeed, I'm nothing of the kind," she said hurriedly. "Pray don't talk such utter nonsense, Lottie. If you have nothing more sensible to say, you had better hold your tongue."

"But why are you ashamed of it?" Lottie persisted: "I wouldn't be." She had an unsuspected secret herself, but she would have owned it proudly enough had she been challenged.

"I'm not ashamed," said Addie; "and you know nothing about being in love, so you had better not talk about it."

"Oh yes, I do!" was the reply, uttered with Lottie's calm simplicity of manner: "I know how to tell whether you are in love or not, Addie. What would you do if a girl were to win Horace Thorne away from you?"

Pride and a sense of propriety dictated

Addie's answer and gave sharpness to her voice: "I should say she was perfectly welcome to him."

Lottie considered for a moment: "Yes, I suppose one might *say* so to her, but what would you do? Wouldn't you want to kill her? And wouldn't you die of a broken heart?"

Addie was horrified: "I don't want to kill anybody, and I'm not going to die for Mr. Horace Thorne. Please don't say such things, Lottie: people never do. You forget he is only an acquaintance."

"No; I don't think you are in love with him, certainly." Lottie pronounced this decision with the air of one who has solved a difficult problem.

"What are you talking about?" Mrs. Blake inquired, coming back, and glancing from Addie's flushed and troubled face to Lottie's thoughtful eyes.

"I was asking Addie if she didn't want Horace to be the heir. I know you do, mamma—oh, just for his own sake, because you think he's the nicest, don't you? I heard you tell him one day"—here Lottie looked up with a candid gaze and audaciously imitated Mrs. Blake's manner—"that though we knew his cousin *first*, he—Horace, you know—seemed to drop *so* naturally into *all* our ways that it was quite *delightful* to feel that we needn't stand on *any* ceremony with him."

"Good gracious, Lottie! what do you mean by listening to every word I say?"

"I didn't listen—I heard," said Lottie. "I always do hear when you say your words as if they had little dashes under them."

"Well, Horace Thorne *is* easier to get on with than his cousin," said Mrs. Blake, taking no notice of Lottie's mimicry.

"There, I said so: mamma would like it to be Horace. Nobody asks what I should like—nobody thinks about me and Percival."

"Oh, indeed! I wasn't aware," said Mrs. Blake. "When is that to come off? I dare say you will look very well in orange-blossoms and a pinafore!"

"Oh, you think I'm too young, do you? But a little while ago you were

always saying that I was grown up, and oughtn't to want any more childish games. What was I to do?"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake. "I'll buy you a doll for a birthday present, to keep you out of mischief."

"Too late," said Lottie from the rug. She burst into sudden laughter, loud but not unmelodious. "What rubbish we are talking! Seventeen to-morrow, and Addie is nearly twenty; and sometimes I think I must be a hundred!"

"Well, you are talking nonsense now," Mrs. Blake exclaimed. "Why, you baby! only last November you would go into that wet meadow by the rectory to play trap-and-ball with Robin and Jack. And such a fuss as there was if one wanted to make you the least tidy and respectable!"

"Was that last November?" Lottie stared thoughtfully into space. "Queer that last November should be so many years ago, isn't it? Poor little Cock Robin! I met him in the lane the day before he went away. They will keep him in jackets, and he hates them so! I laughed at him, and told him to be a good little boy and mind his book. He didn't seem to like it, somehow."

"I dare say he didn't," said Addie, who had been silently recovering herself: "there's no mistake about it when you laugh at any one."

"There shall be no mistake about anything I do," Lottie asserted. "I'm going to bed now." She sprang to her feet and stood looking at her sister: "What jolly hair you've got, Addie!"

"Yours is just as thick, or thicker," said Addie.

"Each individual hair is a good deal thicker, if you mean that. 'Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horse-hairs!' That's what Percy quoted to me one day when I was grumbling, and I said I wasn't sure he wasn't rude. Addie, are Horace and Percival fond of each other?"

"How can I tell? I suppose so."

"I have my doubts," said Lottie sagely. "Why should they be? There must be something queer, you know, or why doesn't that stupid old man at Bracken-

hill treat Percival as the eldest? Well, good-night." And Lottie went off, half saying, half singing, "Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the Sparrow—with my bow and arrow." And with a triumphant outburst of "*I killed Cock Robin!*" she banged the door after her.

There was a pause. Then Addie said, "Seventeen to-morrow! Mamma, Lottie really is grown-up now."

"Is she?" Mrs. Blake replied doubtfully. "Time she should be, I'm sure."

Lottie had been a sore trial to her mother. Addie was pretty as a child, tolerably presentable even at her most awkward age, glided gradually into girlhood and beauty, and finally "came out" completely to Mrs. Blake's satisfaction. But Lottie at fifteen or sixteen was her despair—"Exactly like a great unruly boy," she lamented. She dashed through her lessons fairly well, but the moment she was released she was unendurable. She whistled, she sang at the top of her voice, and plunged about the house in her thick boots, till she could be off to join the two boys at the rectory, her dear friends and comrades. Robin Wingfield, the elder, was her junior by rather more than a year; and this advantage, especially as she was tall and strong for her age, enabled her fully to hold her own with them. Nor could Mrs. Blake hinder this friendship, as she would gladly have done, for her husband was on Lottie's side.

"Let the girl alone," he said. "Too big for this sort of thing? Rubbish! The milliner's bills will come in quite soon enough. And what's amiss with Robin and Jack? Good boys as boys go, and she's another; and if they like to scramble over hedges and ditches together, let them. For Heaven's sake, Caroline, don't attempt to keep her at home: she'll certainly drive me crazy if you do. No one ever banged doors as Lottie does: she ought to patent the process. Slams them with a crash which jars the whole house, and yet manages not to latch them, and the moment she is gone they are swinging backward and forward till I'm almost out of my senses. Here she comes down stairs, like a thun-

derbolt.—Lottie, my dear girl, I'm sure it's going to be fine: better run out and look up those Wingfield boys, I think."

So the trio spent long half-holidays rambling in the fields; and on these occasions Lottie might be met, an immense distance from home, in the shabbiest clothes and wearing a red cap of Robin's tossed carelessly on her dark hair. Percival once encountered them on one of these expeditions. Lottie's beauty was still pale and unripe, like those sheathed buds which will come suddenly to their glory of blossom, not like rosebuds which have a loveliness of their own; but the young man was struck by the boyish mixture of shyness and bluntness with which she greeted him, and attracted by the great eyes which gazed at him from under Robin's shabby cap. When he and Horace went to the Blakes' he amused himself idly enough with the school-girl, while his cousin flirted with Addie. He laughed one day when Mrs. Blake was unusually troubled about Lottie's apparel, and said something about "a sweet neglect." But the soul of Lottie's mamma was not to be comforted with scraps of poetry. How could it be, when she had just arraigned her daughter on the charge of having her pockets bulging hideously, and had discovered that those receptacles overflowed with a miscellaneous assortment of odds and ends, the accumulations of weeks, tending to show that Lottie and Cock Robin, as she called him, had all things in common? How could it be, when Lottie was always outgrowing her garments in the most ungainly manner, so that her sleeves seemed to retreat in horror from her wrists and from her long hands, tanned by sun and wind, seamed with bramble-scratches and smeared with school-room ink? Once Lottie came home with an unmistakable black eye, for which Robin's cricket-ball was accountable. Then, indeed, Mrs. Blake felt that her cup of bitterness was full to overflowing, though Lottie did assure her, "You should have seen Jack's eye last April: his was much more swollen, and all sorts of colors, than mine." It was impossible to avoid the conclusion

that Jack must have been, to say the least of it, unpleasant to look at. Percival happened to come to the house just then, and was tranquilly amused at the good lady's despair. It was before the Blakes knew much of Horace, and she had not yet discovered that Percival's cousin was so much more friendly than Percival himself; so she made the latter her confidant. He recommended a raw beefsteak with a gravity worthy of a Spanish grandee. He was not allowed to see Lottie, who was kept in seclusion as being half culprit, half invalid, and wholly unpresentable; but as he was going away the servant gave him a little note in Lottie's boyish scrawl:

"DEAR PERCIVAL: Mamma was cross with Robin and sent him away do tell him I'm all right, and he is not to mind he will be sure to be about somewhere It is very stupid being shut up here Addie says she can't go running about giving messages to boys and Papa said if he saw him he should certainly punch his head so please tell him he is not to bother himself about me I shall soon be all right."

Percival went away, smiling a little at his letter and at Lottie herself. Just as he reached the first of the fields which were the short cut from the house, he spied Robin lurking on the other side of the hedge, with Jack at his heels. He halted, and called "Robin! Robin Wingfield! I want to speak to you."

The boy hesitated: "There's a gate farther on."

Coming to the gate, Percival rested his arms on it and looked at Robin. The boy was not big for his age, but there was a good deal of cleverness in his upturned freckled face. "I've a message for you," said the young man.

"From her?" Robin indicated the Blakes' house with a jerk of his head.

"Yes. She asked me to tell you that she is all right, though, of course, she can't come out at present. She made sure I should find you somewhere about."

Robin nodded: "I did try to hear how she was, but that old dragon—"

"Meaning my friend Mrs. Blake?" said

young Thorne. "Ah! Hardly civil perhaps, but forcible."

"Well—Mrs. Blake, then—caught me in the shrubbery and pitched into me. Said I ought to be ashamed of myself. Supposed I should be satisfied when I'd broken Lottie's neck. Told me I'd better not show my face there again."

"Well," said Percival, "you couldn't expect Mrs. Blake to be particularly delighted with your afternoon's work. And, Wingfield, though I was especially to tell you that you were not to vex yourself about it, you really ought to be more careful. Knocking a young lady's eye half out—"

"Young lady!" in a tone of intense scorn. "Lottie isn't a *young lady*."

"Oh! isn't she?" said Percival.

"I should think not, indeed!" And Robin eyed the big young man who was laughing at him as if he meditated wiping out the insult to Lottie then and there. But even with Jack, his sturdy satellite, to help, it was not to be thought of. "She's a brick!" said Cock Robin, half to himself.

"No doubt," said Percival. "But, as I was saying, it isn't exactly the way to treat her.—At least—I don't know: upon my word, I don't know," he soliloquized. "Judging by most women's novels, from *Jane Eyre* downward, the taste for muscular bullies prevails. Robin may be the coming hero—who knows?—and courtship commencing with a black eye the future fashion.—Well, Robin, any answer?"

"Tell her I hope she'll soon be all right. Shall you see her?"

"I can see that she gets any message you want to send."

Robin groped among his treasures: "Look here: I brought away her knife that afternoon. She lent it me. She'd better have it—it's got four blades—she may want it, perhaps."

Percival dropped the formidable instrument carelessly into his pocket: "She shall have it. And, Robin, you'd better not be hanging about here: Lottie says so. You'll only vex Mrs. Blake."

"All right!" said the boy, and went off, with Jack after him.

Percival, who was staying in the neighborhood, went straight home, tied up a parcel of books he thought might amuse Lottie in her imprisonment, and wrote a note to go with them. He was whistling softly to himself as he wrote, and, if the truth be told, had a fair vision floating before his eyes—a girl of whom Lottie had reminded him by sheer force of contrast. Still, he liked Lottie in her way. He was young enough to enjoy the easy sense of patronage and superiority which made the words flow so pleasantly from his pen. Never had Lottie seemed to him so utterly a child as immediately after his talk with her boy-friend.

"Here are some books," said the hurrying pen, "which I think you will like if your eye is not so bad as to prevent your reading. Robin was keeping his disconsolate watch close by, as you foretold, and asked anxiously after you, so I gave him your message and dismissed him. He especially charged me to send you the enclosed—knife I believe he called it: it looks to me like a whole armory of deadly weapons—which he seemed to think would be a comfort to you in your affliction. I sincerely hope it may prove so. I was very civil to him, remembering that I was your ambassador; but if he isn't a little less rough with you in future, I shall be tempted to adopt Mr. Blake's plan if I happen to meet your friend again. You really mustn't let him damage those eyes of yours in this reckless fashion. Mrs. Blake was nearly heartbroken this morning."

He sent his parcel off, and speedily ceased to think of it. And Lottie herself might have done the same, not caring much for his books, but for four little words—"those eyes of yours." Had Percival written "your eyes," it would have meant nothing, but "those eyes of yours" implied notice—nay, admiration. Again and again she looked at the thick paper, with the crest at the top and the vigorous lines of writing below; and again and again the four words, "those eyes of yours," seemed to spring into ever-clearer prominence. She hid the letter away with a sudden comprehension of the roughness of her pencil scrawl which it

answered, and began to take pride in her looks when they least deserved it. Only a day or two before she had envied Robin the possession of sight a little keener than her own, but now she smiled to think that Percival Thorne would never have regretted injury to "those eyes of yours" had she owned Robin's light-gray orbs.

Her transformation had begun. The knife was still a treasure, but she was ashamed of her delight in it. She breathed on the shining blades and rubbed them to brightness again, but she did it stealthily, with a glance over her shoulder first. She went rambling with Robin and Jack, but not when she knew that Percival Thorne was in the neighborhood. She was very sure of his absence on the November day to which her mother had alluded, when she had insisted on playing trap-and-ball in the rectory meadows. Mrs. Blake did not realize it, but it was almost the last day of Lottie's old life. At Christmas-time they were asked to stay for a few days at a friend's house. There was to be a dance, and the hostess, being Lottie's godmother, pointedly included her in the invitation; so Mrs. Blake and Addie did what they could to improve their black sheep's appearance.

Lottie, dressed for the eventful evening, was left alone for a moment before the three went down. She felt shy, dispirited and sullen. Her ball-dress encumbered and constrained her. "I hate it all," she said to herself, beating impatiently with her foot upon the ground. Something moving caught her eye: it was her reflection in a mirror. She paused and gazed in wonder. Was this slender girl, arrayed in a cloud of semi-transparent white, really herself—the Lottie who only a few days before had raced Robin Wingfield home across the fields, had been the first over the gap and through the ditch into the rectory meadow, and had rushed away with the November rain-drops driving in her face? She gazed on: the transformation had its charms, after all. But the shadow came back: "It's no use. Addie's prettier than I ever shall be: I must be second all my

life. Second! If I can't be A 1, I'd as soon be Z 1000! I won't go about to be a foil to her. I'd ten times rather race with Robin; and I will too! They sha'n't coop me up and make a young lady of me!"

She caught the flash of her indignant glance in the glass and paused.

"*Those eyes of yours!*"

Must she be second all her life? Had she not a power and witchery of her own? Might she not even distance Addie in the race? "I've more brains than she has," mused Lottie.

Her heart was beating fast as they came down stairs. They had only arrived by a late train, which gave them just time to dress; and Mrs. Blake had rather exceeded the allowance, so that most of the guests had arrived and the first quadrille was nearly ended as they came in. Lottie followed her mother and Addie as they glided through the crowd, and when they paused she stood shy and fierce, casting lowering glances around.

She heard their hostess say to some one, "Do let me find you a partner."

A well-known voice replied, "Not this time, thank you: I'm going to try to find one for myself;" and Percival stood before her, looking, to her girlish fancy, more of a hero than ever in the evening-dress which became him well. The perfectly-fitting gloves, the flower in his coat, a dozen little things which she could not define, made her feel uncouth and anxious, fascinated and frightened, all at once. Had he greeted her in the patronizing way in which he had talked to her of old, she would have been deeply wounded, but he asked her for the next dance more ceremoniously, she knew, than Horace would have asked Addie. Still, she trembled as they moved off. They had scarcely met since her note to him. Suppose he alluded to it, asked after her black eye, and inquired whether she had derived any benefit from the beefsteak? Nothing more natural, and yet if he did Lottie felt that she should *hate* him. "I know I should do something dreadful," she thought—"scratch his face, and then burst out crying, most likely. Oh, what would become of me? I should be

ruined for life! I should have to shut myself up, never see any one again, and emigrate with Robin directly he was old enough."

Percival did not know his danger, but he escaped it. The fatal thoughts were in his mind while Lottie was planning her disgrace and exile, but he merely remarked that he liked the first waltz, and should they start at once or wait a moment till a couple or two dropped out?

"I don't know whether I *can* waltz," said Lottie doubtfully.

"Weren't you over tortured with dancing-lessons?"

"Oh yes. But I've never tried at a party. Suppose we go bumping up against everybody, like that fat man and the little lady in pink—the two who are just stopping?"

"I assure you," said Percival gravely, "that I do not dance at all like that fat man. And if you dance like the lady in pink, I shall be more surprised than I have words to say. Now?"

They were off. Percival knew that he waltzed well, and had an idea that Lottie would prove a good partner. Nor was he mistaken. She had been fairly taught, much against her will, had a good ear for time, and, thanks to many a race with Robin Wingfield, her energy was almost terrible. They spun swiftly and silently round, unwearied while other couples dropped out of the ranks to rest and talk. Percival was well pleased. It is true that he had memories of waltzes with Sissy Langton of more utter harmony, of sweeter grace, of delight more perfect, though far more fleeting. But Lottie, with her steady swiftness and her strong young life, had a charm of her own which he was not slow to recognize. She would hardly have thanked him for accurately classifying it, for as she danced she felt that she had discovered a new joy. Her old life slipped from her like a husk. Friendship with Cock Robin was an evident absurdity. It is true she was angry with herself that, after fighting so passionately for freedom, she should voluntarily bend her proud neck beneath the yoke. She foresaw that her mother

and Addie would triumph; she felt that her bondage to Mrs. Grundy would often be irksome; but here was the first instalment of her wages in this long waltz with Percival. She fancied that the secret of her pleasure lay in the two words—"with Percival." In her ignorance she thought that she was tasting the honeyed fire of love, when in truth it was the sweetness of conscious success. Before the last notes of that enchanted music died away she had cast her girlish devotion, "half in a rapture and half in a rage," at her partner's feet, while he stood beside her calm and self-possessed. He would have been astounded, and perhaps almost disgusted, had he known what was passing through her mind.

Love at sixteen is generally only a desire to be in love, and seeks not so much a fit as a possible object. Probably Lottie's passion offered as many assurances of domestic bliss as could be desired at her age.

Percival was dark, foreign-looking and handsome: he had an interesting air of reserve, and no apparent need to practise small economies. His clothes fitted him extremely well, and at times he had a way of standing proudly aloof which was worthy of any hero of romance. No settled occupation would interfere with picnics and balls; and, to crown all, had he not said to her, "Those eyes of yours"? Were not these ample foundations for the happiness of thirty or forty years of marriage?

Percival, meanwhile, wanted to be kind to the childish, half-tamed Lottie, who had attracted his notice in the fields and trusted him with her generous message to Robin Wingfield. The girl fancied herself immensely improved by her white dress, but had Thorne been a painter he would have sketched her as a pale vision of Liberty, with loosely-knotted hair and dark eyes glowing under Robin's red cap. He was able coolly to determine the precise nature of his pleasure in her society, but he knew that it was a pleasure. And Lottie, when she fell asleep that night, clasped a card which was rendered priceless by the frequent recurrence of his initials.

Her passion transformed her. Her vehement spirit remained, but everything else was changed. Her old dreams and longings were cast out by the new. She laughed with Mrs. Blake and Addie, but under the laughter she hid her love, and cherished it in fierce and solitary silence. Yet even to herself the transformation seemed so wonderful that she could hardly believe in it, and acted the rough girl now and then with the idea that otherwise they *must* think her a consummate actress morning, noon and night. For some months no great event marked the record of her unsuspected passion. It might, perhaps, have run its course, and died out harmlessly in due time, but for an unlucky afternoon, about a week before her birthday, when Percival uttered some thoughtless words which woke a tempest of doubt and fear in Lottie's heart. She did not question his love, but she caught a glimpse of his pride, and felt as if a gulf had opened between her and her dream of happiness.

Percival was calling at the house on the eventful day which was destined to influence Lottie's fate and his own. He was in a happy mood, well pleased with things in general, and, after his own fashion, inclined to be talkative. When visitors arrived and Addie exclaimed, "Mrs. Pickering and that boy of hers—oh bother!" she spoke the feelings of the whole party; and Percival from his place by the window looked across at Lottie and shrugged his shoulders expressively. Had there been time he would have tried to escape into the garden with his girl friend; but as that was impossible, he resigned himself to his fate and listened while Mrs. Pickering poured forth her rapture concerning her son's prospects to Mrs. Blake. An uncle who was the head of a great London firm had offered the young man a situation, with an implied promise of a share in the business later. "Such a subject for congratulation!" the good lady exclaimed, beaming on her son, who sat silently turning his hat in his hands and looking very pink. "Such an opening for William! Better than having a fortune left him, I call it, for it is such a thing to have an oc-

cupation. Every young man should be brought up to something, in my opinion."

Mrs. Blake, with a half glance at Addie and a thought of Horace, suggested that heirs to landed estates—

"Well, yes." Mrs. Pickering agreed with her. Country gentlemen often found so much to do in looking after their tenants and making improvements that she would not say anything about them. But young men with small incomes and no profession—she should be sorry if a son of hers—

"Like me, for instance," said Percival, looking up. "I've a small income and no profession."

Mrs. Pickering, somewhat confused, hastened to explain that she meant nothing personal.

"Of course not," he said: "I know that. I only mentioned it because I think an illustration stamps a thing on people's memories."

"But, Percival," Mrs. Blake interposed, "I must say that in this I agree with Mrs. Pickering. I do think it would be better if you had something to do—I do indeed." She looked at him with an air of affectionate severity. "I speak as your friend, you know." (Percival bowed his gratitude.) "I really think young people are happier when they have a settled occupation."

"I dare say that is true, as a rule," he said.

"But you don't think you would be?" questioned Lottie.

He turned to her with a smile: "Well, I doubt it. Of course I don't know how happy I might be if I had been brought up to a profession." He glanced through the open window at the warm loveliness of June. "At this moment, for instance, I might have been writing a sermon or cutting off a man's leg. But, somehow, I am very well satisfied as I am."

"Oh, if you mean to make fun of it—" Mrs. Blake began.

"But I don't," Percival said quickly. "I may laugh, but I'm in earnest too. I have plenty to eat and drink; I can pay my tailor and still have a little money in my pocket; I am my own master. Sometimes I ride—another man's horse: if

not I walk, and am just as well content. I don't smoke—I don't bet—I have no expensive tastes. What could money do for me that I should spend the best years of my life in slaving for it?"

"That may be all very well for the present," said Mrs. Blake.

"Why not for the future too? Oh, I have my dream for the future too."

"And, pray, may one ask what it is?" said Mrs. Pickering, looking down on him from the height of William's prosperity.

"Certainly," he said. "Some day I shall leave England and travel leisurely about the Continent. I shall have a sky over my head compared with which this blue is misty and pale. I shall gain new ideas. I shall get grapes and figs and melons very cheap. There will be a little too much garlic in my daily life—even such a destiny as mine must have its drawbacks—but think of the wonderful scenery I shall see and the queer, beautiful out-of-the-way holes and corners I shall discover! And in years to come I shall rejoice, without envy, to hear that Mr. Blake has bought a large estate and gains prizes for fat cattle, while my friend here has been knighted on the occasion of some city demonstration."

Young Pickering, who had been listening open-mouthed to the other's fluent and tranquil speech, reddened at the allusion to himself and dropped his hat.

"At that rate you must never marry," said Mrs. Blake.

Percival thoughtfully stroked his lip: "You think I should not find a wife to share my enjoyment of a small income?"

"Marry a girl with lots of money, Mr. Thorne," said the future Sir William, feeling it incumbent on him to take part in the conversation.

"Not I." Percival's glance made the lad's hot face yet hotter. "That's the last thing I will do. If a man means to work, he may marry whom he will. But if he has made up his mind to be idle, he is a contemptible cur if he will let his wife keep him in his idleness." He spoke very quietly in his soft voice, and leaned back in his chair.

"Well, then, you must never fall in love with an heiress," said Mrs. Blake.

"Or you must work and win her," Lottie suggested almost in a whisper.

He smiled, but slightly shook his head with a look which she fancied meant "Too late." Mrs. Pickering began to tell the latest Fordborough scandal, and the talk drifted into another channel.

Lottie had listened as she always listened when Percival spoke, but she had not attached any peculiar meaning to his words. But an hour or so later, when he was gone and she was loitering in the garden just outside the window, Addie, who was within, made some remark in a laughing tone. Lottie did not catch the words, but Mrs. Blake's reply was distinct and not to be mistaken: "William Pickering, indeed! No: with your looks and your expectations you girls ought to marry really well." Lottie stood aghast. They would have money, then? She had never thought about money. She would be an heiress? And Percival would never marry an heiress — he could not: had he not said so? How gladly would she have given him every farthing she possessed! And was her fortune to be a barrier between them for ever? Every syllable that he had spoken was made clear by this revelation, and rose up before her eyes as a terrible word of doom. But she was not one to be easily dismayed, and her first cry was, "What shall I do?" Lottie's thoughts turned always to action, not to endurance, and she was resolved to break down the barrier, let the cost be what it might. Her talk with Godfrey Hammond gave a new interest to her romance and new strength to her determination. Since her hero was disinherited and poor, and she, though rich, would be poor in all she cared to have if she were parted from him, might she not tell him so when she saw him on her birthday? She thought it would be easier to speak on the one day when in girlish fashion she would be queen. She would not think of her own pride, because his pride was dear to her. She could not tell what she would say or do: she only knew that her birthday should decide her fate. And

her heart was beating fast in hope and fear the night before when she banged the door after her and went off to bed, sublimely ready to renounce the world for Percival.

CHAPTER III.

DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES — ALFRED THORNE'S IS TOLD BY THE WRITER.

MR. THORNE of Brackenhill was a miserable man, who went through the world with a morbidly sensitive spot in his nature. A touch on it was torture, and unfortunately the circumstances of his daily life continually chafed it.

It was only a common form of selfishness carried to excess. "I don't want much," he would have said — truly enough, for Godfrey Thorne had never been grasping—"but let it be my own." He could not enjoy anything unless he knew that he might waste it if he liked. The highest good, fettered by any condition, was in his eyes no good at all. Brackenhill was dear to him because he could leave it to whom he would. He was seventy-six, and had spent his life in improving his estate, but he prized nothing about it so much as his right to give the result of his life's work to the first beggar he might chance to meet. It would have made him still happier if he could have had the power of destroying Brackenhill utterly, of wiping it off the face of the earth, in case he could not find an heir who pleased him, for it troubled him to think that some man *must* have the land after him, whether he wished it or not.

Godfrey Hammond had declared that no one could conceive the exquisite torments Mr. Thorne would endure if he owned an estate with a magnificent ruin on it, some unique and priceless relic of bygone days. "He should be able to see it from his window," said Hammond, "and it should be his, as far as law could make it, while he should be continually conscious that in the eyes of all cultivated men he was merely its guardian. People should write to the newspapers asserting boldly that the public had a right

of free access to it, and old gentlemen with antiquarian tastes should find a little gap in a fence, and pen indignant appeals to the editor demanding to be immediately informed whether a monument of national, nay, of world-wide interest, ought not, for the sake of the public, to be more carefully protected from injury. Local archæological societies should come and read papers in it. Clergymen, wishing to combine a little instruction with the pleasures of a school-feast, should arrive with van-loads of cheering boys and girls, a troop of ardent teachers, many calico flags and a brass band. Artists, keen-eyed and picturesque, each with his good-humored air of possessing the place so much more truly than any mere country gentleman ever could, should come to gaze and sketch. Meanwhile, Thorne should remark about twice a week that of course he could pull the whole thing down if he liked; to which every one should smile assent, recognizing an evident but utterly unimportant fact. And then," said Hammond solemnly, "when all the archæologists were eating and drinking, enjoying their own theories and picking holes in their neighbors' discoveries, the bolt should fall in the shape of an announcement that Mr. Thorne had sold the stones as building materials, and that the workmen had already removed the most ancient and interesting part. After which he would go slowly to his grave, dying of his triumph and a broken heart."

It was all quite true, though Godfrey Hammond might have added that all the execrations of the antiquarians would hardly have added to the burden of shame and remorse of which Mr. Thorne would have felt the weight before the last cart carried away its load from the trampled sward; that he would have regretted his decision every hour of his life; and if by a miracle he could have found himself once more with the fatal deed undone, he would have rejoiced for a moment, suffered his old torment for a little while, and then proceeded to do it again.

For a great part of Mr. Thorne's life the boast of his power over Brackenhill had been on his lips more frequently

than the twice a week of which Hammond talked. Of late years it had not been so. He had used his power to assure himself that he possessed it, and gradually awoke to the consciousness that he had lost it by thus using it.

He had had three sons—Maurice, a fine, high-spirited young fellow; Alfred, good-looking and good-tempered, but indolent; James, a slim, sickly lad, who inherited from his mother a fatal tendency to decline. She died while he was a baby, and he was petted from that time forward. Godfrey Thorne was well satisfied with Maurice, but was always at war with his second son, who would not take orders and hold the family living. They argued the matter till it was too late for Alfred to go into the army, the only career for which he had expressed any desire; and then Mr. Thorne found himself face to face with a gentle and lazy resistance which threatened to be a match for his own hard obstinacy. Alfred didn't mind being a farmer. But his father was troubled about the necessary capital, and doubted his son's success: "You will go on after a fashion for a few years, and then all the money will have slipped through your fingers. You know nothing of farming."—"That's true," said Alfred.—"And you are much too lazy to learn."—"That's very likely," said the young man. So Mr. Thorne looked about him for some more eligible opening for his troublesome son; and Alfred meanwhile, with his handsome face and honest smile, was busy making love to Sarah Percival, the rector's daughter.

The little idyl was the talk of the villagers before it came to the squire's ears. When he questioned Alfred the young man confessed it readily enough. He loved Miss Percival, and she didn't mind waiting. Mr. Thorne was not altogether displeased, for, though his intercourse with the rector was rather stormy and uncertain, they happened to be on tolerable terms just then. Sarah was an only child, and would have a little money at Mr. Percival's death, and Alfred was much more submissive and anxious to please his father under these altered cir-

cumstances. The young people were not to consider themselves engaged, Miss Percival being only eighteen and Alfred one-and-twenty. But if they were of the same mind later, when the latter should be in a position to marry, it was understood that neither his father nor Mr. Percival would oppose it.

Unluckily, a parochial question arose near Christmas-time, and the squire and the clergyman took different views of it. Mr. Thorne went about the house with brows like a thunder-cloud, and never opened his lips to Alfred except to abuse the rector. "You'll have to choose between old Percival and me one of these days," he said more than once. "You'd better be making up your mind: it will save time." Alfred was silent. When the strife was at its height Maurice was drowned while skating.

The poor fellow was hardly in his grave before the storm burst on Alfred's head. If Mr. Thorne had barely tolerated the idea of his son's marriage before, he found it utterly intolerable now; and the decree went forth that this boyish folly about Miss Percival must be forgotten. "I can do as I like with Brackenhill," said Mr. Thorne: "remember that," Alfred did remember it. He had heard it often enough, and his father's angry eyes gave it an added emphasis. "I can make an eldest son of James if I like, and I will if you defy me." But nothing could shake Alfred. He had given his word to Miss Percival, and they loved each other, and he meant to keep to it. "You don't believe me," his father thundered: "you think I may talk, but that I sha'n't do it. Take care!" There was no trace of any conflict on Alfred's face: he looked a little dull and heavy under the bitter storm, but that was all. "I can't help it, sir," he said, tracing the pattern of the carpet with the toe of his boot as he stood: "you will do as you please, I suppose."—"I suppose I shall," said Mr. Thorne.

So Alfred was disinherited. "As well for this as anything else," he said: "we couldn't have got on long." He had an allowance from his father, who declined to take any further interest in his plans.

He went abroad for a couple of years—a test which Mr. Percival imposed upon him that nothing might be done in haste—and came back, faithful as he went, to ask for the consent which could no longer be denied. Mr. Percival had been presented to a living at some distance from Brackenhill, and, as there was a good deal of glebe-land attached to it, Alfred was able to try his hand at farming. He did so, with a little loss if no gain, and they made one household at the rectory.

He never seemed to regret Brackenhill. Sarah—dark, ardent, intense, a strange contrast to his own fair, handsome face and placid indolence—absorbed all his love. Her eager nature could not rouse him to battle with the world, but it woke a passionate devotion in his heart: they were everything to each other, and were content. When their boy was born the rector would have named him Godfrey: at any rate, he urged them to call him by one of the old family names which had been borne by bygone generations of Thornes. But the young husband was resolved that the child should be Percival, and Percival only. "Why prejudice his grandfather against him for a mere name?" the rector persisted. But Alfred shook his head. "Percival means all the happiness of my life," he said. So the child received his name, and the fact was announced to Mr. Thorne in a letter brief and to the point like a challenge.

Communications with Brackenhill were few and far between. From the local papers Alfred heard of the rejoicings when James came of age, quickly followed by the announcement that he had gone abroad for the winter. Then he was at home again, and going to marry Miss Harriet Benham; whereat Alfred smiled a little. "The governor must have put his pride in his pocket: old Benham made his money out of composite candles, then retired, and has gas all over the house for fear they should be mentioned. Harry, as we used to call her, is the youngest of them—she must be eight or nine and twenty; fine girl, hunts—tried it on with poor Maurice

ages ago. I should think she was about half as big again as Jim. Well, yes, perhaps I am exaggerating a little. How charmed my father must be!—only, of course, anything to please Jim, and it's a fine thing to have him married and settled."

Alfred read his father's feelings correctly enough, but Mr. Thorne was almost repaid for all he had endured when, in his turn, he was able to write and announce the birth of a boy for whom the bells had been set ringing as the heir of Brackenhill. Jim, with his sick fancies and querulous conceit, Mrs. James Thorne, with her coarsely-colored splendor and imperious ways, faded into the background now that Horace's little star had risen.

The rest may be briefly told. Horace had a little sister who died, and he himself could hardly remember his father. His time was divided between his mother's house at Brighton and Brackenhill. He grew slim and tall and handsome—a Thorne, and not a Benham, as his grandfather did not fail to note. He was delicate. "But he will outgrow that," said Mrs. Middleton, and loved him the better for the care she had to take of him. It was principally for his sake that she was there. She was a widow and had no children of her own, but when, at her brother's request, she came to Brackenhill to make more of a home for the school-boy, she brought with her a tiny girl, little Sissy Langton, a great-niece of her husband's.

Meanwhile, the other boy grew up in his quiet home, but death came there as well as to Brackenhill, and seemed to take the mainspring of the household in taking Sarah Thorne. Her father pined for her, and had no pleasure in life except in her child. Even when the old man was growing feeble, and it was manifest to all but the boy that he would not long be parted from his daughter, it was a sombre but not an unhappy home for the child. Something in the shadow which overhung it, in his grandfather's weakness and his father's silence, made him grave and reserved, but he always felt that he was loved. No playful home-

name was ever bestowed on the little lad, but it did not matter, for when spoken by Alfred Thorne no name could be so tender as Percival.

The rector's death when the boy was fifteen broke up the only real home he was destined to know, for Alfred was unable to settle down in any place for any length of time. While his wife and her father were alive their influence over him was supreme: he was like the needle drawn aside by a powerful attraction. But now that they were gone his thoughts oscillated a while, and then reverted to Brackenhill. For himself he was content—he had made his choice long ago—but little by little the idea grew up in his mind that Percival was wronged, for he, at least, was guiltless. He secretly regretted the defiant fashion in which his boy had been christened, and made a feeble attempt to prove that, after all, Percy was an old family name. He succeeded in establishing that a "P. Thorne" had once existed, who of course might have been Percy, as he might have been Peter or Paul; and he tried to call his son Percy in memory of this doubtful namesake. But the three syllables were as dear to the boy as the white flag to a Bourbon. They identified him with the mother he dimly remembered, and proclaimed to all the world (that is, to his grandfather) that for her sake he counted Brackenhill well lost. He triumphed, and his father was proud to be defeated. To this day he invariably writes himself "Percival Thorne."

Alfred, however, had his way on a more important point, and educated his son for no profession, because the head of the house needed none. Percival acquiesced willingly enough, without a thought of the implied protest. He was indolent, and had little or no ambition. Since daily bread—and, luckily, rather more than daily bread, for he was no ascetic—was secured to him, since books were many and the world was wide, he asked nothing better than to study them. He grew up grave, dreamy and somewhat solitary in his ways. He seemed to have inherited something of the rec-

tor's self-possessed and rather formal courtesy, and at twenty he looked older than his age, though his face was as smooth as a girl's.

He was not twenty-one when his father died suddenly of fever. When the news reached Brackenhill the old squire was singularly affected by it. He had been accustomed to contrast Alfred's vigorous prime with his own advanced age, Percival's unbroken health with Horace's ailing boyhood, and to think mournfully of the probability that the old manor-house must go to a stranger unless he could humble himself to the son who had defied him. But, old as he was, he had outlived his son, and he was dismayed at his isolation. A whole generation was dead and gone, and the two lads, who were all that remained of the Thornes of Brackenhill, stood far away, as though he stretched his trembling hands to them across their fathers' graves. He expressly requested that Percival should come and see him, and the young man presented himself in his deep mourning. Sissy, just sixteen, looked upon him as a sombre hero of romance, and within two days of his coming Mrs. Middleton announced that her brother was "perfectly infatuated about that boy."

The evening of his arrival he stood with his grandfather on the terrace looking at the wide prospect which lay at their feet—ample fields and meadows, and the silvery flash of water through the willows. Then he turned, folded his arms and coolly surveyed Brackenhill itself from end to end. Mr. Thorne watched him, expecting some word, but when none came, and Percival's eyes wandered upward to the soft evening sky, where a glimmering star hung like a lamp above the old gray manor-house, he said, with some amusement, "Well, and what is your opinion?"

Percival came down to earth with the greatest promptitude: "It's a beautiful place. I'm glad to see it. I like looking over old houses."

"Like looking over old houses? As if it were merely a show! Isn't Brackenhill more to you than any other old house?" demanded Mr. Thorne.

"Oh, well, perhaps," Percival allowed: "I have heard my father talk of it of course."

"Come, come! You are not such an outsider as all that," said his grandfather.

The young man smiled a little, but did not speak.

"You don't forget you are a Thorne, I hope?" the other went on. "There are none too many of us."

"No," said Percival. "I like the old house, and I can assure you, sir, that I am proud of both my names."

"Well, well! very good names. But shouldn't you call a man a lucky fellow if he owned a place like this?"

"My opinion wouldn't be half as well worth having as yours," was the reply. "What do you call yourself, sir?"

"Do you think I own this place?" Mr. Thorne inquired.

"Why, yes—I always supposed so. Don't you?"

"No, I don't!" The answer was almost a snarl. "I'm bailiff, overlooker, anything you like to call it. My master is at Oxford, at Christ Church. He won't read, and he can't row, so he is devoting his time to learning how to get rid of the money I am to save up for him. I own Brackenhill?" He faced abruptly round. "All that timber is mine, they say; and if I cut down a stick your aunt Middleton is at me: 'Think of Horace.' The place was mortgaged when I came into it. I pinched and saved—I freed it—for Horace. Why shouldn't I mortgage it again if I please—raise money and live royally till my time comes, eh? They'd all be at me, dinning 'Horace! Horace!' and my duty to those who come after me, into my ears. Look at the drawing-room furniture!"

"The prettiest old room I ever saw," said Percival.

"Ah! you're right there. But my sister doesn't think so. It's shabby, she would tell you. But does she ask me to furnish it for her? No, no, it isn't worth while: mine is such a short lease. When Horace marries and comes into his inheritance, of course it must be done up. It would be a pity to waste money about it now, especially as there's a bit of land

lies between two farms of mine, and if I don't go spending a lot in follies, I can buy it. Think of that! I can buy it—*for Horace!*"

Percival was guarded in his replies to this and similar outbursts; and Mrs. Middleton, seeing that he showed no disposition to toady his grandfather or

to depreciate Horace, told Godfrey Hammond that, though her brother was so absurd about him, she thought he seemed a good sort of young man, after all. "Time will show," was the answer. Now, this was depressing, for Godfrey had established a reputation for great sagacity.



CHAPTER IV.

WISHING WELL AND ILL.



LOTTIE'S birthday had dawned, the fresh morning hours had slipped away, the sun had declined from his midday splendor into golden afternoon, and yet to Lottie herself the day seemed

scarcely yet begun. Its crowning delight was to be a dance given in her honor, and she awaited that dance with feverish anxiety.

It was nearly three o'clock when the dog-cart from Brackenhill came swiftly along the dusty road. It was nearing its destination: already there were distant glimpses of Fordborough with its white suburban villas. Percival Thorne thoroughly enjoyed the bright June weather, the cloudless blue, the clear singing of the birds, the whisper of the leaves, the universal sweetness from far-off fields and blossoms near at hand. He gazed at the landscape with eyes that seemed to be looking at something far away, and yet they were observant enough to note a figure crossing a neighboring field. It was but a momentary vision, and the expression of his face did not vary in the slightest degree, but he turned to the man at his side and spoke in his leisurely fashion: "I'll get down here and walk the rest of the way. You may take my things to Mr. Hardwicke's."

The man took the reins, but he looked round in some wonder, as if seeking the cause of the order. His curiosity was

unsatisfied. The slim girlish figure had vanished behind a clump of trees, and nothing was visible that could in any way account for so sudden a change of purpose. Glancing back as he drove off, he saw only Mr. Percival Thorne, darkly conspicuous on the glaring road, standing where he had alighted, and apparently lost in thought. The roan horse turned a corner, the sound of wheels died away in the distance, and Percival walked a few steps in the direction of Brackenhill, reached a stile, leaned against it and waited.

"Many happy returns of the day to you!" he said as the girl whom he had seen came along the field-path.

Light leafy shadows wavered on her as she walked, and, all unconscious of his presence, she was softly whistling an old tune.

The color rushed to her face, and she stopped short. "Percival! You here?" she said.

"Yes: did I startle you? I was driving into the town, and saw you in the distance. I could not do less—could I?—than stop then and there to pay my respects to the queen of the day. And what a glorious day it is!"

Lottie sprang over the stile, and looked up and down the road. "Oh, you are going to walk?" she said.

"I'm going to walk—yes. But what brings you here wandering about the fields to-day?"

She had recovered her composure, and looked up at him with laughing eyes: "It is wretched indoors. They are so busy fussing over things for to-night, you know."

"Exactly what I thought you would be doing too."

"I? Oh, mamma said I wasn't a bit of use, and Addie said that I was more than enough to drive Job out of his mind. The fact was, I upset one of her flower-vases. And afterward—well, afterward I broke a big china bowl."

"I begin to understand," said Percival thoughtfully, "that they might feel able to get on without your help."

"Yes, perhaps they might. But they needn't have made such a noise about the thing, as if nobody could enjoy the dance to-night because a china bowl was smashed! Such rubbish! What could it matter?"

"Was it something unique?"

"Oh, it was worse than that," she answered frankly: "it was one of a set. But I don't see why one can't be just as happy without a complete set of everything."

"There I agree with you," he replied. "I certainly can't say that my happiness is bound up with crockery of any kind. And, do you know, Lottie, I'm rather glad it was one of a set. Otherwise, your mother might have known that there was something magical about it, but one of a set is prosaic—isn't it? Suppose it had been a case of—

If this glass doth fall,
Farewell then, O Luck of Edenhall!"

"Well, the luck would have been in uncommonly little bits," she replied. "I smashed it on a stone step, and they were so cross that I was crosser, so I said I would come out for a walk."

"And do you feel any better?" he asked in an anxious voice.

"Yes, thank you. Being in the open air has done me good."

"Then may I go with you? Or will nothing short of solitude effect a complete cure?"

"You may come," she said gravely. "That is, if you are not afraid of the remains of my ill-temper."

"No, I'm not afraid. I don't make light of your anger, but I believe I'm naturally very brave. Where are we going?"

She hesitated a moment, then looked up at him: "Percival, isn't this the way to the wishing-well? Ever since we came to Fordborough, three months ago, I've wanted to go there. Do you know where it is?"

"Oh yes, I know it. It is about a mile from here, or perhaps a little more. That won't be too far for you, will it?"

"Too far!" She laughed outright.

"Why, I could walk ten times as far, and dance all night afterward."

"Then we'll go," said Percival. And, crossing the road, they passed into the fields on the opposite side. A pathway, too narrow for two to walk abreast, led them through a wide sea of corn, where the flying breezes were betrayed by delicate tremulous waves. Lottie led the way, putting out her hand from time to time as she went, and brushing the bloom from the softly-swaying wheat. She was silent. Fate had befriended her strangely in this walk. The loneliness of the sunlit fields was far better for her purpose than the crowd and laughter of the evening, but her heart almost failed her, and with childish superstition she resolved that she would not speak the words which trembled on her lips until she and Percival should have drunk together of the wishing-well. He followed her, silent too. He was well satisfied to be with his beautiful school-girl friend, free to speak or hold his peace as he chose. Freedom was the great charm of his friendship with Lottie—freedom from restraint and responsibility. For if Percival was serenely happy and assured on any single point, he was so with regard to his perfect comprehension of the Blakes in general, and Lottie in particular. He had some idea of giving his cousin Horace a word of warning on the subject of Mrs. Blake's designs. He quite understood that good lady's feelings concerning himself. "I'm nobody," he thought. "I'm not to be thrown over, because I introduced Horace to them; besides, I'm an additional link between Fordborough and Brackenhill, and Mrs. Blake would give her ears to know Aunt Middleton. And I am no trouble so long as I am satisfied to amuse myself with Lottie. In fact, I am rather useful. I keep the child out of mischief, and I don't give her black eyes, as that Wingfield boy did." And from this point Percival would glide into vague speculation as to Lottie's future. He was inclined to think that the girl would do something and be something when she grew up. She was vehement, resolute, ambitious. He wondered idly, and a little sentiment-

ally, whether hereafter, when their paths had diverged for ever, she would look back kindly to these tranquil days and to her old friend Percival. He rather thought not. She would have enough to occupy her without that.

It was true, after a fashion, that Lottie was ambitious in her dreams of love. Her lover must be heroic, handsome, a gentleman by birth, with something of romance about his story. A noble poverty might be more fascinating than wealth. There was but one thing absolutely needful: he must not be commonplace. It was the towering yet unsubstantial ambition of her age, a vision of impossible splendor and happiness. Most girls have such dreams: most women find at six or seven and twenty that their enchanted castles in the air have shrunk to brick-and-mortar houses. Tastes change, and they might even be somewhat embarrassed were they called on to play their parts in the passionate love-poems which they dreamed at seventeen. But the world was just opening before Lottie's eyes, and she was ready to be a heroine of romance.

"This way," said Percival; and they turned into a narrow lane, deep and cool, with green banks overgrown with ferns, and arching boughs above. As they strolled along he gathered pale honeysuckle blossoms from the hedge, and gave them to Lottie.

"How pretty it is!" said the girl, looking round.

"Wait till you see the well," he replied. "We shall be there directly: it is prettier there."

"But this is pretty too: why should I wait?" said Lottie.

"You are right. I don't know why you should. Admire both: you are wiser than I, Lottie."

As he spoke, the lane widened into a grassy glade, and Lottie quickened her steps, uttering a cry of pleasure. Percival followed her with a smile on his lips. "Here is your wishing-well," he said. "Do you like it, now that you have found it out?"

She might well have been satisfied, even if she had been harder to please.

It was a spring of the fairest water, bubbling into a tiny hollow. The little pool was like a brimming cup, with colored pebbles and dancing sand at the bottom, and delicate leaf-sprays clustered lightly round its rim. And this gem of sparkling water was set in a space of mossy sward, with trees which leant and whispered overhead, their quivering canopy pierced here and there by golden shafts of sunlight and glimpses of far-off blue.

"It is like fairy-land," said Lottie.

"Or like something in Keats's poems," Percival suggested.

"I never read a line of them, so I can't say," she answered with defiant candor, while she inwardly resolved to get the book.

He smiled: "You don't read much poetry yet, do you? Ah, well, you have time enough. How about wishing, now we are here?" he went on, stooping to look into the well. "Your wishes ought to have a double virtue on your birthday."

"I only hope they may."

"What! have you decided on something very important? Seventeen to-day! Lottie, don't wish to be eighteen: that will come much too soon without wishing."

"I don't want to be eighteen. I think seventeen is old enough," she answered dreamily,

"So do I." He was thinking, as he spoke, what a charming childish age it was, and how, before he knew Lottie, he had fancied from books that girls were grown up at seventeen.

"Now I am going to wish," she said seriously, "and you must wish after me." Bending over the pool, she looked earnestly into it, took water in the hollow of her hand and drank. Then, standing back, she made a sign to her companion.

He stepped forward, and saying, with a bright glance, "My wishes must be for you to-day, Queen Lottie," he followed her example. But when he looked up, shaking the cold drops from his hand, he was struck by the intense expression on her downward-bent face. "What has the child been wishing?" he wondered; and an idea flashed suddenly into his

mind which almost made him smile. "By Jove!" he said to himself, "there will be a fiery passion one of these fine days, when Lottie falls in love." But even as he thought this the look which had startled him was gone.

"We needn't go back directly, need we?" she said. "Let us rest a little while."

"By all means," Percival replied. "I'm quite ready to rest as long as you like: I consider resting my strong point. What do you say to this bank? Or there is a fallen tree just across there?"

"No. Percival, listen! There are some horrid people coming: let us go on a little farther, out of their way."

He listened: "Yes, there are some people coming. Very likely they are horrid, though we have no fact to go upon except their desire to find the wishing-well: at any rate, we don't want them. Lottie, you are right: let us fly."

They escaped from the glade at the farther end, passed through a gate into a field, and found themselves once more in the broad sunlight. They paused for a moment, dazzled and uncertain which way to go. "*Why* did those people come and turn us out?" said Thorne regretfully. A shrill scream of laughter rang through the shade which they had just left. "What shall we do now?"

"I don't mind: I like this sunshine," said Lottie. "Percival, don't you think there would be a view up there?"

"Up there" was a grassy little eminence which rose rather abruptly in the midst of the neighboring fields. It was parted from the place where they stood by a couple of meadows.

"I should think there might be."

"Then let us go there. When I see a hill I always feel as if I must get to the top of it."

"I've no objection to that feeling in the present case, as the hill happens to be a very little one," Percival replied. "And the shepherds and shepherdesses in our Arcadia are unpleasantly noisy. But I don't see any gate into the next field."

"Who wants a gate? There's a gap by that old stump."

"And you don't mind this ditch? It

isn't very wide," he said as he stood on the bank.

"No, I don't mind it."

He held out his hand: she laid hers on it and sprang lightly across, with a word of thanks. A few months earlier she would have scorned Cock Robin's assistance had the ditch been twice as wide, as that day she would have scorned any assistance but Percival's. It was well that she did not need help, for his outstretched hand, firm as it was, gave her little. It rather sent a tremulous thrill through her as she touched it that was more likely to make her falter than succeed. She was not vexed that he relapsed into silence as they went on their way. In her eyes his aspect was darkly thoughtful and heroic. As she walked by his side the low grass-fields became enchanted meads and the poor little flowers bloomed like poets' asphodel. A lark sang overhead as never bird sang before, and the breeze was sweet with memories of blossom. When they stood on the summit of the little hill the view was fair as Paradise. A big gray stone lay among the tufts of bracken, as if a giant hand had tossed it there in sport. Lottie sat down, leaning against it, and Percival threw himself on the grass at her feet.

She was nerving herself to overcome an unwonted feeling of timidity. She had dreamed of this birthday with childish eagerness. Her fancy had made it the portal of a world of unknown delights. She grew sick with fear, lest through her weakness or any mischance the golden hours should glide by, and no golden joy be secured before the night came on. Golden hours? Were they not rather golden moments on the hillside with Percival? He loved her—she was sure of that—but he was poor, and would never speak. What could she say to him? She bent forward a little that she might see him better as he lay stretched on the warm turf unconscious of her eyes. Through his half-closed lids he watched the little gray-blue butterflies which flickered round him in the sunny air, emerging from or melting into the eternal vault of blue.

"Percival!"

She had spoken, and ended the long silence. She almost fancied that her voice shook and sounded strange, but he did not seem to notice it.

"Yes?" he said, and turned his face to her—the face that was the whole world to Lottie.

"Percival, is it true that your father was the eldest son, and that you ought to be the heir?"

He opened his eyes a little at the breathless question. Then he laughed: "I might have known that you could not live three months in Fordborough without hearing something of that."

"It is true, then? Mayn't I know?"

"Certainly." He raised himself on his elbow. "But there is no injustice in the matter, Lottie. The eldest son died, and my father was the second. He wanted to have his own way, as we most of us do, and he gave up his expectations and had it. He did it with his eyes open, and it was a fair bargain."

"He sold his birthright, like Esau? Well, that might be quite right for him, but isn't it rather hard on you?"

"Not at all," he answered promptly. "I never counted on it, and therefore I am not disappointed. Why should I complain of not having what I did not expect to have? Shall I feel very hardly used when the archbishopric of Canterbury falls vacant and they pass me over?"

"But your father shouldn't have given up your rights," the girl persisted.

"Why, Lottie," he said with a smile, "it was before I was born! And I'm not so sure about my rights. I don't know that I have any particular rights or wrongs." There was a pause, and then he looked up. "Suppose the birthright had been Jacob's, and he had thrown it away for Rachel's sake: would you have blamed him?"

"No," said Lottie, with kindling eyes.

"Then Jacob and Rachel's son is not hardly used, and has no cause to complain of his lot," Percival concluded, sinking back lazily.

Lottie was silent for a moment. Then she apparently changed the subject:

"Do you remember that day Mrs. Pickering called and talked about William?"

"Oh yes, I remember. I scandalized the old lady, didn't I? Lottie, I'm half afraid I scandalized your mother into the bargain."

"I've been thinking about what you said," Lottie went on very seriously—"about being idle all your life."

"Ah!" said Percival, drawing a long breath. "*You* are going to lecture me? Well, I don't know why I should be surprised. Every one lectures me: they don't like it, but feel it to be their duty. I dare say Addie will begin this evening." He was amused at the idea of a reproof from Lottie, and settled his smooth cheek comfortably on his sleeve that he might listen at his ease. "Go on," he said: "it's very kind of you, and I'm quite ready."

"Suppose I'm not going to lecture you," said Lottie.

"Why, that's still kinder. What then?"

"Suppose I think you are right."

"Do you?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "William Pickering may spend his life scraping pounds and pence together. Men who can't do anything else may as well do that, for it *is* nice to be rich. But if you have enough, why should you spend your time over it—the best years of your life which will never come back?"

"Never!" said Percival. "You are right."

There was a long pause. Lottie pulled a bit of fern, and looked at him again. There was a line between his dark brows, as if he were pursuing some thought which her words had suggested, but he held his head down and was silent. She threw the fern away and pressed her hands together: "But, Percival, you do care for money, after all. You set it above everything else, as they all do, only in a different way. You are right in what you say, but they are more honest, for they say and do alike."

"Do I care for money? Lottie, it's the first time I have ever been charged with that."

"Because you talk as if you didn't. But you do. Why did you say you

would never marry an heiress? The color went right up to the roots of your hair when they talked about it, and you said it would be contemptible: that was the word—contemptible. Then I suppose if you cared for her, and she loved you with all her heart and soul, you would go away and leave her to hate the world and herself and you, just because she happened to have a little money. And you say you don't care about it!"

"Lottie, you don't know what you are talking about." His eyes were fixed on the turf. She had called up a vision in which she had no part. "You don't understand," he began.

"It is you who don't understand," she answered desperately. "You men judge girls—I don't know how you judge them—not by themselves: by their worldly-wise mammas, perhaps. Do you fancy we are always counting what money men have or what we have? It's you who think so much about it. Oh, Percival!" the strong voice softened to sudden tenderness, "do you think I care a straw about what I shall have one day?"

"Good God!" Percival looked up, and for the space of a lightning flash their eyes met. In hers he read enough to show him how blind he had been. In his she read astonishment, horror, repulsion.

Repulsion she read it, but it was not there. To her dying day Lottie will believe that she saw it in his eyes. Did she not feel an icy stab of pain when she recognized it? Never was she more sure of her own existence than she was sure of this. And yet it was not there. She had suddenly roused him from a dream, and he was bewildered, shocked—sorry for his girl-friend, and bitterly remorseful for himself.

Lottie knew that she had made a terrible mistake, and that Percival did not love her. There was a rushing as of water in her ears, a black mist swaying before her eyes. But in a moment all that was over, and she could look round again. The sunlit world glared horribly, as if it understood and pressed round her with a million eyes to mock her burning shame.

"No, I never thought you cared for money," said Percival, trying to seem unconscious of that lightning glance with all its revelations. He had not the restless fingers so many men have, and could sit contentedly without moving a muscle. But now he was plucking nervously at the turf as he spoke.

"What does it matter?" said Lottie. "I shall come to care for it one of these days, I dare say."

He did not answer. What could he say? He was cursing his blind folly. Poor child! Why, she *was* only a child, after all—a beautiful, headstrong, wilful child, and it was not a year since he met her in the woods with torn frock and tangled hair, her long hands bleeding from bramble-scratches and her lips stained with autumn berries. How fiercely and shyly she looked at him with her shining eyes! He remembered how she stopped abruptly in her talk and answered him in monosyllables, and how, when he left the trio, the clear, boyish voice broke instantly into a flood of happy speech. As he lay there now, staring at the turf, he could see his red-capped vision of Liberty as plainly as if he stood on the woodland walk again with the September leaves above him. He felt a rush of tender, brotherly pity for the poor mistaken child—"brotherly" in default of a better word. Probably a brother would have been more keenly alive to the forward folly of Lottie's conduct. Percival would have liked to hold out his hand to the girl, to close it round hers in a tight grasp of fellowship and sympathy, and convey to her, in some better way than the clumsy utterance of words, that he asked her pardon for the wrong he had unconsciously done her, and besought her to be his friend and comrade for ever. But he could not do anything of the kind: he dared not even look up, lest a glance should scorch her as she quivered in her humiliation. He ended as he began, by cursing the serene certainty that all was so harmless and so perfectly understood, which had blinded his eyes and brought him to this.

And Lottie? She hardly knew what she thought. A wild dream of a desert

island in tropic seas, with palms tower- | dashing on the coral shore, and herself
ing in the hot air and snow-white surf | and Cock Robin parted from all the



"FOR THE SPACE OF A LIGHTNING FLASH THEIR EYES MET."—Page 31.

world by endless leagues of ocean, flitted before her eyes. But that was impossible, absurd.

He was laughing at her, no doubt—scorning her in his heart. Oh, why had she been so mad? Suppose a thunder-

bolt were to fall from the blue sky and crush him into eternal silence as he lay at her feet pulling his little blades of grass? No! Lottie did not wish that: the thought was hideous. Yet had not such a wish had a momentary life as she stared at the hot blue sky? Was it written there, or wandering in the air, or uttered in the busy humming of the flies, so that as she gazed and listened she became conscious of its purport? Surely she never wished it. Why could not the gray rock against which she leaned totter and fall and bury her for ever, hiding her body from sight while her spirit fled from Percival? Yet even that was not enough: they might meet in some hereafter. Lottie longed for annihilation in that moment of despair.

This could not last. It passed, as the first faintness had done, and with an aching sense of shame and soreness (almost worse to bear because there was no exaltation in it) she came back to every-day life. She pushed her hair from her forehead and got up. "I suppose you are not going to stay here all day?" she said.

Percival stretched himself with an air of indolent carelessness: "No, I suppose not. Do you think duty calls us to go back at once?"

"It is getting late," was her curt reply; and he rose without another word.

She was grave and quiet: if anything, she was more self-possessed than he was, only she never looked at him. Perhaps if he could have made her understand what was in his heart when first he realized the meaning of her hasty words, she might have grasped the friendly hand he longed to hold out to her. But not now. Her face had hardened strangely, as if it were cut in stone. They went down the hill in silence, Percival appearing greatly interested in the landscape. As they crossed the level meadows Lottie looked round with a queer fancy that she might meet the other Lottie there, the girl who had crossed them an hour before. At the ditch Thorne held out his hand again. She half turned, looked straight into his eyes with a passionate glance of hatred, and sprang across, leaving him to follow.

He rejoined her as she reached the glade. While they had been on the hill the sun had sunk below the arching boughs, and half the beauty of the scene was gone. The noisy picnic party had unpacked their hampers, the turf was littered with paper and straw, and a driver stood in a central position, with his head thrown back, drinking beer from a bottle. Lottie went straight to the well and took another draught.

"Two wishes in one day?" said Percival.

"Second thoughts are best," she answered, turning coldly away. "Is there no other way home? I hate walking the same way twice."

"There is the road: I'm afraid it may be hot, but it would be a change."

"I should prefer the road," she said.

That walk seemed interminable to Percival Thorne. He was ready to believe that the road lengthened itself, in sheer spite, to leagues of arid dust, and that every familiar landmark fled before him. At last, however, they approached a point where two ways diverged—the one leading straight into the old town, while the other, wide and trimly kept, passed between many bright new villas and gardens. At that corner they might part. But before they reached it a slim, gray-clad figure appeared from the suburban road and strolled leisurely toward them. Percival looked, looked again, shaded his eyes and looked. "Why, it's Horace!" he exclaimed.

Lottie made no reply, but she awoke from her sullen musing, a light flashed into her eyes, and she quickened her pace toward the man who should deliver her from her *tête-à-tête* with Percival.

CHAPTER V.

WHY NOT LOTTIE?

PERCIVAL advanced to meet his cousin. "You here, Horace?" he said.

"So it seems," the other replied, in a voice which sounded exactly as if Percival had answered his own question.

The two young men were wonderfully alike, though hardly one person in a hun-

dred could see it. They were exactly the same height, their features were similar, they walked across the room in precisely the same way, and unconsciously reproduced each other's tricks of manner with singular fidelity. Yet any remark on this resemblance would almost certainly encounter a wondering stare, and "Oh, do you think so? Well, I must confess I can't see much likeness myself;" the fact being that the similarity was in form and gait, while both color and expression differed greatly. Horace's hair had the same strong waves as Percival's, but it was chestnut-brown, his eyes were a clear light gray, his complexion showed a fatal delicacy of white and red. His expression was more varying, his smile was readier and his glance more restless.

He had once taken a college friend, whose hobby was photography, to Brackenhill. Young Felton arrived with all his apparatus, and photographed the whole household with such inordinate demands on their time, and such atrocious results, that every one fled from him in horror. Horace was the most patient of his victims, and Felton declared that he *would* have a good one of Thorne. But even Horace was tired out at last, and said very mildly that he didn't particularly care for the smell of the stuff, and he was afraid his portraits wouldn't help him to a situation if ever he wanted one—apply, stating terms and enclosing carte; that he thought it uncommonly kind of Felton to take so much trouble, but if ever he let him try again, he'd be— Sissy was there, and the sentence, which had been said over his shoulder as he leaned out of the window, ended in a puff of smoke up into the blue. Felton begged for one more, and persuaded Sissy to be his advocate. "I've an idea that something will come of it," said the hapless photographer. Horace yielded at last, and sat down, grimly resolute that he would yield no more. Something *did* come of it. Felton got it very much too dark, and the result was a tolerable photograph and a startling likeness of Percival.

The incident caused some little amusement at Brackenhill, and visitors were

duly puzzled with the portrait. But it was not long remembered, and people dropped into their former habit of thinking that there was but a slight resemblance between the cousins. Only, Percival carried off the photograph, and was interested for a week or two in questions of doubtful identity, looking up a few old cases of mysterious claimants, and speculating as to the value of the testimony for and against them.

Horace shook hands with Lottie, and uttered his neatly-worded birthday wishes. Her answer was indistinctly murmured, but she looked up at him, and he paused, struck as by something novel and splendid, when he encountered the dark fire of her eyes. "I left them wondering what had become of you," he said. "They thought you were wandering about alone somewhere, and had lost yourself."

"Instead of which we met on the road, didn't we?" said Percival.

"Yes," she answered indifferently.— "And you came to look for me?"

"Of course. I was on my way to hunt up the town-crier and to make our loss known to the police. In half an hour's time we should have been dragging all the ponds."

"I think I'd better go and set mamma's anxious mind at rest," said Lottie with a short laugh. "Good-bye for the present." She was gone in a moment, leaving the young men standing in the middle of the road. Horace made a movement as if to follow her, then checked himself and looked at his cousin.

Percival made haste to speak: "So you have come down for the birthday-party, too? Where are you staying?"

"Oh, the Blakes find me a bed. I'm off again to-morrow morning."

"You are now at Scarborough with my aunt? I have it on Sissy's authority."

"There's no occasion to disturb that faith," said Horace lightly. "Are you going into the town? I'll walk a little way with you."

"You are not going to see them at Brackenhill before you leave?"

Horace shook his head: "Say nothing

about me. Did you tell them where you were going?"

"No. I don't suppose they know of the Blakes' existence."

"So much the better. *I'm* not going to enlighten them."

They strolled on side by side, and for a minute neither spoke. Horace was chafing because it had occurred to him that afternoon that Mrs. Blake seemed rather to take his devotion to Addie for granted. His path was made too smooth and obvious, and it was evident that the prize might be had for the asking. Consequently, Master Horace, who was not at all sure that he wanted it, was irritable and inclined to swerve aside.

"Are not you playing a dangerous game?" said Percival. "Sooner or later some one will mention the fact of these visits to the squire, and there'll be a row."

"Well, then, there *must* be a row. It's uncommonly hard if I'm never to speak to any one without going to Brackenhill first to ask leave," said Horace discontentedly. "How should you like it yourself?"

"Not at all."

"No more do I. I'm tired of being in leading-strings, and the long and short of it is that I mean to have my own way in this, at any rate."

"In *this*? Is this a matter of great importance, then? Horace, mind what you are after with the Blakes."

"You're a nice consistent sort of fellow," said Horace.

"Oh, you may call me what you like," Percival replied.

"Who introduced me to these people before they came to Fordborough? Who comes down to Brackenhill—the dullest hole, now there's no shooting—because it's Lottie Blake's birthday? Whose name is a sort of household word here—Percival this and Percival that? Percival without any Thorne to it, mind."

"I plead guilty. What then?"

"What then? Why, I wish you to remark that *this* is your example, while your precept is—"

"Take care what you are about with the Blakes. Yes, old fellow, you'd bet-

ter leave my example alone, and stick to the precept. My wisdom takes that form, I admit." He spoke with more meaning than Horace perceived.

"Well, thanks for your advice," said the young man with a laugh. "Though I can't see any particular harm in my coming down to-day."

"No harm. Only remember that there is such a place as Brackenhill."

"The governor oughtn't to find fault with me, since you're in the same boat. He never thinks you can do wrong."

"Never."

"You're a lucky fellow to have only yourself to please."

"Very lucky," said Percival dryly. "Will you change places with me?"

"Change places? What do you mean?"

The other looked fixedly at him, and said in a pointed manner, "I fancy it might easily be managed—with Addie Blake's help."

The suggestion was unpleasant. Horace winced, and vented his displeasure in a random attack: "And why Addie, I should like to know? How can you tell it is Addie at all?"

"Who, then?"

"Why not Lottie?" The words were uttered without a moment's thought, and might have been forgotten as soon as said. But Percival was taken by surprise, and a look of utter incredulity flashed across his face. Horace caught it and was piqued. "Unless you understand her so well that you are sure that no one else has a chance. Of course, if that is the case—"

"Not at all," Percival exclaimed. "It's not for me to pretend to understand Lottie: I'm not such a fool as that."

"All the same," Horace said to himself, "you think you understand her better than I do, and you don't believe I should have a chance if I tried to cut you out. Well, Mr. Percy, you may be right, but, on the other hand, you *may* be mistaken." And, as he walked back to the Blakes, Horace hurriedly resolved to teach his cousin that he was not to consider Lottie his exclusive property. He knew the folly of such a proceeding, but who was ever hindered from obeying

the dictates of wounded vanity by the certainty that he had much better not?

Percival sincerely wished the evening over. He dared not stay away, lest his absence should provoke comment, but he feared some childish outbreak of petulance on Lottie's part. When he saw her he was startled by her beauty. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were full of brilliant meaning. She cast a defiant glance at him as she went by. She was burning with shame, and maddened by the cruel injustice of her fate. A white light seemed to have poured in upon her, and she found it incredible that she could ever have felt or acted as she had felt and acted that afternoon. She said to herself that she might as well have been punished for her conduct in a dream.

Percival plucked up courage enough to go and ask her to dance. He was distressed and pitiful, and longing to make amends, and stood before her like the humblest of suitors. She assented coolly enough. No one saw that there was anything amiss, though he was quick to remark that she gave him only square dances. No more waltzes with Lottie for him. But Horace had one, and when it was over he leaned almost exhausted against the wall, while Lottie stood by his side and fanned herself. The fan seemed to throb in unison with her strong pulses, quickened by the dance and slackening as she rested.

"That was splendid," said Horace with breathless brevity. "Best waltz I ever had."

"Ah!" said Lottie, turning toward him. "Suppose Addie heard that, Mr. Thorne?"

They looked straight into each other's eyes, and Horace felt a strange thrill run through him. He evaded her question with a laugh. "Why do you call me Mr. Thorne?" he asked. "If you call that fellow by his Christian name, why not me? Mine isn't such a mouthful as Percival: try it."

"We knew him first, you see," Lottie replied with much innocence.

"As if that had anything to do with it! If you had known my grandfather

first, I suppose you would have called him Godfrey?"

"Perhaps he wouldn't have asked me," said Lottie.

Horace smiled: "Well, perhaps he wouldn't. He isn't much given to making such requests, certainly. But I do ask you. Look!" he exclaimed, with sudden animation, "there's Mrs. Blake taking that dried-up little woman—what is her name?—to the piano. I may have the next dance, I hope."

"How many more things are you going to ask for all at once?" The bright fan kept up its regular come and go, and Lottie's eyes were very arch above it. "I'm sure you don't take after your grandfather."

"Believe me," said Horace, "you would be awfully bored if I did. But you haven't given me an answer. This dance?"

"I've promised it to Mr. Hardwicke. Adieu, *Horace!*" And before he could utter a syllable she was across the room, standing by the little spinster who was going to play, and helping her to undo a clashing bracelet of malachite and silver which hung on her bony wrist.

Horace, gazing after her, felt a hand on his shoulder and looked round.

"I'm off when this dance is over," said Percival, who seemed weary and depressed. "You still wish me not to say that I have seen you?"

Horace nodded: "I shall be at Scarborough again to-morrow night. There's no occasion to say anything."

"All right. You know best."

"Who can tell what may happen?" said Horace. "Why should one be in a hurry to do anything unpleasant? Put it off, and you may escape it altogether. For instance, the governor may change all at once, as people do in tracts and Christmas books. I don't say it's likely, but I feel that I ought to give him the chance."

"Very good," said Percival; and he strolled away. Horace noted his preoccupied look with a half smile, but after a moment his thoughts and eyes went back to Lottie Blake, and he forgot all about his cousin and Brackenhill.

CHAPTER VI.

HER NAME.

MOST country towns have some great event which marks the year, or some peculiarity which distinguishes them from their neighbors. This one has its annual ball, that its races, another its volunteer reviews. One seems to relish no amusement which has not a semi-religious flavor, and excels in school-feasts, choir-festivals, and bazaars. Some places only wake up on the fifth of November, and some are devoted to amateur theatricals. Fordborough had its agricultural show.

Crowds flocked to it, not because they cared for fat cattle, steam ploughs and big vegetables, but because everybody was to be seen there. You stared at the prize pig side by side with the head of one of the great county families, who had a faint idea that he had been introduced to you somewhere (was it at the last election?), and politely entered into conversation with you on the chance. You might perhaps suspect that his remembrance of you was not very clear, when you reflected afterward that he

Asked after my wife, who is dead,
And my children, who never were born ;

but at any rate he meant to be civil, and people who saw you talking together would not know what he said. Or you might find the old friend you had not seen for years, gold eye-glass in hand, peering at a plate of potatoes. Or you were young, and there was a girl—no, *the* girl, the one girl in all the world—bewitchingly dressed, a miracle of beauty, looking at Jones's patent root-pulper. You lived for months on the remembrance of the words you exchanged by a friendly though rather deafening threshing-machine when her mamma (who never liked you) marched serenely on, unconscious that Edith was lingering behind. Then there was the flower-show, where a band from the nearest garrison town played the last new waltzes, and people walked about and looked at everything except the flowers. Fordborough was decked with flags and garlands, and appropriate sentiments on the subject of agriculture, in evergreen letters stitched on calico, were lavishly

displayed. Every one who possessed anything beyond a wheelbarrow got into it and drove about, the bells clashed wildly in the steeple, and everything was exceedingly merry—if it didn't rain.

People in that part of the world always filled their houses with guests when the time for the show came round. Even at Brackenhill, though the squire said he was too old for visitors, he made a point of inviting Godfrey Hammond, while Mrs. Middleton, as soon as the day was fixed, sent off a little note to Horace. It was taken for granted that Horace would come. Aunt Harriet considered his invariable presence with them on that occasion as a public acknowledgment of his position at Brackenhill. But the day was gone by when Mr. Thorne delighted to parade his grandson round the field, showing off the slim handsome lad, and proving to the county that with his heir by his side he could defy the son who had defied him. Matters were changed since then. The county had, as it were, accepted Horace. The quarrel was five-and-twenty years old, and had lost its savor. It was tacitly assumed that Alfred had in some undefined way behaved very badly, that he had been very properly put on one side, and that in the natural course of things Horace would succeed his grandfather, and was a nice, gentlemanly young fellow. Mr. Thorne had only to stick to what he had done to ensure the approval of society.

But people did not want, and did not understand, the foreign-looking young man with the olive complexion and sombre eyes who had begun of late years to come and go about Brackenhill, and who was said to be able to turn old Thorne round his finger. This was not mere rumor. The squire's own sister complained of his infatuation. It is true that she also declared that she believed the newcomer to be a very good young fellow, but the complaint was accepted and the addition smiled away. "It is easy to see what her good young man wants there," said her friends; and there was a general impression that it was a shame. Opinions concerning the probable result varied, and people offered airily to bet on

Horace or Percival as their calculations inclined them. The majority thought that old Thorne could never have the face to veer round again; but there was the possibility on Percival's side that his grandfather might die intestate, and with so capricious and unaccountable a man it did not seem altogether improbable. "Then," as people sagely remarked, "this fellow would inherit—that is, if Alfred's marriage was all right." No one had any fault, except of a negative kind, to find with Percival, yet the majority of Mr. Thorne's old friends were inclined to dislike him. He did not hunt or go to races: he cared little for horses and dogs. No one understood him. He was indolent and sweet-tempered, and he was supposed to be satirical and scheming. What could his grandfather see in him to prefer him to Horace? Percival would have answered with a smile, "I am not his heir."

Mr. Thorne was happy this July, his boy having come to Brackenhill for a few days which would include the show.

It was the evening before, and they were all assembled. Horace, coffee-cup in hand, leant in his favorite attitude against the chimney-piece. He was troubled and depressed, repulsed Mrs. Middleton's smiling attempts to draw him out, and added very little to the general conversation. "Sulky" was Mr. Thorne's verdict.

Percival was copying music for Sissy. She stood near him, bending forward to catch the full light of the lamp to aid her in picking up a dropped stitch in her aunt's knitting. Close by them sat Godfrey Hammond in an easy-chair.

He was a man of three or four and forty, by no means handsome, but very well satisfied with his good figure and his keen, refined features. He wanted color, his closely-cut hair was sandy, his eyes were of the palest gray, and his eyebrows faintly marked. He was slightly underhung, and did not attempt to hide the fact, wearing neither beard nor moustache. His face habitually wore a questioning expression.

Godfrey Hammond never lamented his want of good looks, but he bitterly

regretted the youth which he had lost. His regret seemed somewhat premature. His fair complexion showed little trace of age, he had never known what illness was, and men ten or fifteen years younger might have envied him his slight active figure. But in truth the youth which he regretted was a dream. It was that legendary Golden Age which crowns the whole world with far-off flowers and fills hearts with longings for its phantom loveliness. The present seemed to Hammond hopeless, commonplace and cold, a dull procession of days tending downward to the grave. He was thus far justified in his regrets, that if his youth were as full of beauty and enthusiasm as he imagined it, he was very old indeed.

"What band are they going to have to-morrow, Percival?" asked Sissy.

"I did hear, but I forget. Stay, they gave me a programme when I was at the bookseller's this afternoon." He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a handful of papers and letters. "It was a pink thing—I thought you would like it: what has become of it, I wonder?"

As he turned the papers over a photograph slipped out of its envelope. Sissy saw it: "Percival, is that some one's carte? May I look?"

"What!" said Godfrey Hammond, sticking a glass in his eye and peering short-sightedly, "Percy taking to carrying photographs about with him! Wonders will never cease! What fair lady may it be?—Come, man, let us have a look at her."

Percival colored very slightly, and then, as it were, contradicted his blush by tossing the envelope and its contents across to Godfrey: "No fair lady. Ask Sissy what she thinks of him."

"Why, it's young Lisle!" said Hammond. Mr. Thorne looked up with sudden interest.

Percival reclaimed the photograph: "Here, Sissy, what do you say? Should you like him for your album?"

"For my album? A man I never saw! Who is he?" Miss Langton inquired. "Oh, he's very handsome, though, isn't he?"

Percival saw his grandfather was looking. "It's Mr. Lisle's son," he said.

"And very handsome? Doesn't take after his father."

(Mr. Lisle had been Percival's guardian for the few months between his father's death and his majority. It had been a great grief to Mr. Thorne. Something which he said to his grandson when he first came to Brackenhill had been met by the rejoinder, very cool though perfectly respectful in tone, "But, sir, if Mr. Lisle does not disapprove—" The power-loving old man could not pardon Mr. Lisle for having an authority over Percival which should have belonged to him.)

He put on his spectacles to look at the photograph which Sissy brought. It was impossible to deny the beauty of the face, though the style was rather effeminate: the features were almost faultless.

"Is it like him?" said Sissy, looking up at young Thorne.

"Very like," he replied: "it doesn't flatter him at all, if that is what you mean: does it, Hammond?"

"Not at all."

"He used to sing in the choir of their church," Percival went on. "They photographed him once in his surplice—a sort of ideal chorister. All the old ladies went into raptures, and said he looked like an angel."

"And the young ladies?" said Mrs. Middleton.

"Showed that they thought it."

"H'm!" said Mr. Thorne. "And where may this paragon be?"

"At Oxford."

"Going into the Church?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Not that I ever heard: I don't fancy his tastes lie that way. He is very musical: probably that was why he joined the choir."

"I should say Lisle had money enough," said Godfrey Hammond: "he lives in very good style—if anything, a little too showy perhaps. He won't want a profession. Most likely he will spend his life in thinking that one of these days he will do something wonderful and convulse the musical world. Happy fellow!"

"But suppose he doesn't do it?" said Sissy.

"Happier fellow still! He will never have a doubt, and never know what failure is."

"Perhaps," she said, looking at the bright beautiful face, "it would be better if Mr. Lisle were poor."

"I doubt if he would appreciate the kindness which doomed him to poverty," smiled Hammond.

"But perhaps he would not only dream then of something great: he might do it," said Sissy. "That is, do you think he could really do anything great?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Talent looks very big in a small room."

"Is he the only one?" Mrs. Middleton inquired of Percival.

"The only son: there is a daughter."

"A daughter! Is she as wonderful as her brother?" Sissy exclaimed. "Have you got her photograph? What is she like?"

"I will tell you," said Godfrey Hammond, speaking very deliberately in his high-pitched voice. "Miss Lisle is a very charming young lady. She is like her brother, but she is not so good-looking, and she is decidedly more masculine."

"Oh!" in a disdainful tone. Then, turning swiftly round: "But what do you say, Percival?"

He answered her, but he looked at Godfrey: "Hardly a fair description—not so much a portrait as a caricature. Miss Lisle's features are not so perfect as her brother's: she would not attract the universal admiration which he does. But I think there could be no question that hers is the nobler face."

"She is fortunate in her champion," said Hammond. "It's all right, no doubt, and the fault is mine. I may not have so keen an eye for latent nobility."

"Stick to her brother, then, and let Miss Lisle alone;" and Percival stooped over his copying again. Sissy came back to the table, but as she passed the lonely figure by the chimney-piece she spoke: "You are very silent, to-night, Horace."

"I don't seem to have much to say for myself, do I?"

She took up her knitting, and after a moment he came and stood by her. The

light fell on his face. "And you don't look well," she said.

"There's not much amiss with me."

"I shall betray you," said Percival as he ruled a line. "He coughed in the hall, Sissy: I heard him, three times."

"Oh, my dear boy, you should take more care," exclaimed Aunt Middleton: "I know you have been dreadfully ill."

"I was blissfully unconscious of it, then," said Horace. "It was nothing, and I'm all right, thank you.—You are very busy, Sissy: what are you worrying about down there?" He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder. Percival and she acted brother and sister sometimes, but with Horace, whose pet and playfellow she had been as a little child, it was much more like reality.

"Only a stitch gone."

"Well, let it go: you have lots without it."

"You silly boy! it isn't that. Don't you know it would run farther and farther, and ruin the whole work if it were not picked up at once?"

"You may not be aware of it," said Hammond, "but that sounds remarkably like a tract."

"Then I hope you'll all profit by it.—Horace, do you hear? If ever you drop a stitch, be warned." She looked up as she said it, and something in his face made her fancy that he *had* dropped a stitch of some kind.

When she was saying good-night to Percival, Sissy asked abruptly, in a low voice, "What is Miss Lisle's name?"

He answered, "Judith."

CHAPTER VII.

JAEI, OR JUDITH, OR CHARLOTTE CORDAY.

SISSY, when she reached her room that night, drew up the blind and stood looking out at the park, which was flooded with moonlight. "It ought to be Percival's," she thought. "I should like Horace to have plenty of money, but the old house ought to be Percival's. He is so good: he screens Horace instead of thinking of himself. I do believe Horace is in some scrape now. And Aunt Middleton is al-

ways thinking about him, too: she won't let Uncle Thorne be just to Percival. Oh, it is a shame!—If he had Brackenhill perhaps he would marry Miss Lisle. I wonder if he is in love with her? He spoke so coolly, not as if he were the least bit angry, when Godfrey Hammond laughed at her. But he said she had a noble face.—What did it remind me of when he said 'Judith'?" Sissy was perplexed for a few moments, and then their talk on the terrace a month before flashed into her mind—"Jael, or Judith, or Charlotte Corday," and she remembered the very intonation with which Percival had repeated "Judith." "Ah!" said the girl half aloud, with a sudden intuition, "he was thinking of her when he talked of heroic women!—Why wasn't I born noble and heroic as well as others? Is it my fault if I can't *bear* people to be angry with me—if I always stop and think and hesitate, and then the moment is gone? I couldn't have driven the nail in, like Jael, for fear there should be just time for him to look up at me. I should have thrown the hammer down and died, I think. I wonder what made her able to do it—how she struck, and how she felt when the nail went crashing in? I wonder whether I *could* have done it if Sisera had hated Percival—if I knew he meant to kill him—if it had been Percival's life or his?"

Sissy proceeded to ponder the biblical narrative (with this slight variation), but she came to no satisfactory decision. She inclined to the opinion that Sisera would have woke up, somehow. She could not imagine what she could possibly feel like when the deed was done, except that she was certain she should be afraid ever to be alone with herself again for one moment as long as she lived.

So she went back to the original question: "I dare say Miss Lisle is brave and calm, and horribly strong-minded: why wasn't I born the same as she was? Perhaps Percival would have cared for me then. He *did* say even I might find something I could die for: he didn't think I was quite a coward. Ah! if I could only show him I wasn't!"

She stood for a moment looking out:

"He may marry Miss Lisle if he likes, and—and I hope they'll be very happy indeed. But if ever I get a chance I'll do something—for Percival."

With which magnanimous determination Sissy went to bed; and if she did not have a nightmare tumult of Jael and Judith, nails and hammers, and murdered men about her pillow as she slept, I can but think her fortunate. But her last thought was a happy one: "Perhaps he doesn't care about her, after all!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"PERHAPS I'M LETTING SECRETS OUT."

FORDBOROUGH had a glorious day for the agricultural show. Not a cloud dimmed the brightness of the sky: a breath of warm wind stirred the flags from time to time, and all was going as merrily as possible. The dogs were all barking in their special division, the poultry were all cackling in theirs. People had looked at the animals, as in duty bound, and were now putting their catalogues in their pockets and crowding into the flower-show.

The Brackenhill party were there. Mr. Thorne, his sister, Godfrey Hammond and Miss Langton had come over in state behind the sleek chestnut horses, and the young men had arranged to follow in the dog-cart. At present the two divisions had not met—nay, showed no symptom of uniting, but rather of breaking up into three or four. Mrs. Middleton and Sissy had been walking about, encountering a bewildering number of acquaintances, and earnestly endeavoring to disseminate a knowledge of the fact that they considered it a beautiful day. Godfrey Hammond, their squire for some time, after arranging when he would meet them by the tent where the potatoes were, had taken himself off to look up some of the country gentlemen whom he met year after year when he came down to Brackenhill. There happened to be several squires of the old sort in the neighborhood, and with these Godfrey Hammond enjoyed a friendship

based on mutual contempt. He laughed at them, and they knew it; they laughed at him, and he knew it; and each being convinced that his cause for scorn was the one well founded, they all got on delightfully together. Mr. Thorne, meanwhile, was strolling round the field, halting to talk from time to time, but fettered by no companionship.

He was presently pounced on by Mrs. Rawlinson, a fair, flushed beauty of two-and-forty with a daughter of fifteen. People with a turn for compliment always supposed that this daughter was Mrs. Rawlinson's sister, and when that assumption was negatived there had once been a prompt reply, "Oh, your *step*-daughter you mean!" (The man who invented that last refinement of politeness was welcome to dine at the Rawlinsons' whenever he liked, and, the dinners being good, he was to be met there about twice a week.)

She came down upon Mr. Thorne like a bright blue avalanche. "Ah!" she said, having shaken hands with him, "I saw what you were doing. Now, do you agree with Mr. Horace Thorne in his taste? Oh, it's no use denying it: I saw you were looking at the beautiful Miss Blake."

"It is very possible," Mr. Thorne replied, "only I didn't know of her existence."

"Oh, how severe you are! I suppose you mean you don't admire that style? Well, now you mention it, perhaps—"

"I simply mean what I say. I was not aware that there was a Miss Blake on the ground to-day."

"Well, I *am* surprised! You *are* in the dark! Do you see those tall girls in black and white, close by their mother, that fine woman in green?"

"Perfectly. And which is the beautiful Miss Blake?"

"Oh!" with a little giggle. "Fancy! *Which* is the beautiful Miss Blake? Why, the elder one, of course: there! she is just looking round."

Mr. Thorne put up his eyeglass. "Indeed!" he said; "and who may Miss Blake be?"

"They have come to that pretty white

house where old Miss Hayward lived. Mr. Blake was a relation of hers, and she left it to him. He has some sort of business in London—very rich, they say, and all the young men are after the daughters."

"Probably the daughters haven't the same opinion of the young men of the present day that I have," said Mr. Thorne; "so I needn't pity them."

"Fancy your not knowing anything about them! I *am* surprised!" Mrs. Rawlinson repeated. "Such friends of Mr. Horace Thorne's, too! Ah, by the way, you must mind what you say about the young men who are after them. He's quite a favorite there, I'm told."

"Perhaps Horace told you," the old gentleman suggested with a quiet smile: "the news sounds as if it might come from that authority."

"Oh, no: I think not. Any one in Fordborough could tell you all about it. I suppose this summer— But, dear me! here am I rattling on: perhaps I am letting secrets out."

"Not much of a secret if it is Fordborough talk," said Mr. Thorne blandly. But something in the expression of his eyes made Mrs. Rawlinson feel that she was on dangerous ground, and at any rate she had said enough. She hurried off to greet a friend she saw in the distance.

Mr. Thorne was speedily joined by a neighboring landowner. "I didn't know I should see you here to-day," he said to the newcomer. "I heard you were laid up."

Mr. Garnett cursed his gout, but declared himself better.

"Look here," said Thorne, laying his hand on the other's sleeve, "you know every one. Who and what are these Blakes?"

"Bless me! you don't mean you don't know? Why, the name's up in every railway-station in the United Kingdom. 'Patent British Corn-Flour'—that's the man. 'Delicious Pudding in Five Minutes'—you know the sort of thing. I don't know that he does much in it now: I suppose he has a share. Very rich, they say."

Mr. Thorne had withdrawn his hand, and was listening with the utmost composure. "Ah!" he said, "very rich? And so all these good Fordborough people are paying court to him?"

"No," Garnett grinned, "they don't get the chance: don't see much of him. No loss. They pay court to the daughters: it does just as well, and it's a great deal pleasanter. Dear! dear! what a money-loving age it is! Nothing but trade, trade, trade! We shall see a duke behind the counter before long if we go on at this rate. Gentlemen used to be more particular in our young days—eh, Thorne?" Having said this, he remembered that Thorne's son married the candlemaker's daughter. For a moment he was confounded, and then had to repress an inclination to laugh.

"Ah, it was a different world altogether," said Thorne, gliding dexterously away from the corn-flour and candles too. "There was a young fellow staying with us a little while ago who was wild about photography. If he didn't get just the right focus, the thing came out all wrong: he always made a mess of his groups. The focus was right for us in our young days, eh? Now we have to stand on one side and come out all awry. No fault in the sun, you know."

"I don't care much about photographs," said Garnett. "All very well for the young folks, I dare say, but I sha'n't make a pretty picture on this side of doomsday!" And indeed it did not seem likely that he would. So he departed, grinning, to say to the next man he met, "What do you think I've been doing? Laughing about Blake's patent corn-flour to old Thorne: forgot the composite candles—did, upon my word! Said 'Gentlemen used to be more particular in *our* young days,' and the minute it was out of my mouth I remembered Jim and the candles. Fine girl she was, certainly. Poor old Thorne! he was terribly cut up at the time. It was grand to see the two old fellows meet—as good as a play. Thorne held out just the tips of his fingers: I believe he thought if he shook hands with old Benham he should smell of tallow for ever. Ever see Ben-

ham's monument? They ordered it down from town—man knew nothing of course: how should he? So he went and put some angels weeping, and an inverted torch, just like a bundle of candles. Fact, by Jove! I went to have a look at it myself one day. Some of the Benhams were very sore about it. Dear! dear! I shouldn't think the old fellow could ever have a quiet night there with that over him. Only, as he was covered up snugly first, perhaps he doesn't know;" and Garnett, chuckling to himself at the idea, marched off to have a look at the prize pig.

Meanwhile, the young Thornes had arrived, and came strolling around the field—a noticeable pair enough, tall, handsome and well dressed, walking side by side in all faith and friendliness, as they were not often to walk again. When people talked of them afterward a good many remembered how they looked on that day. Apparently, Horace had resolved to throw off his trouble of the night before, and had succeeded. There was something almost defiant in the very brightness of his aspect, and the heat had flushed him a little, so that no one would have echoed Sissy's exclamation of "You don't look well." On the contrary, he was congratulated on his looks by many of his old friends, and seemed full of life and energy.

Turning the corner of one of the tents, the two came suddenly on the Blakes. There was not one of the four who was utterly unconcerned at that meeting, though the interests and motives which produced the little thrill of excitement were curiously mingled and opposed. Two pairs of eyes flashed bright signals of mutual understanding: the others made no sign of what might be hidden in their depths. Delicately-gloved hands were held out, Mrs. Blake came forward fluent and friendly, and the two groups melted into one.

Horace and Addie led the way round the tent. Percival followed with Lottie and her mother, feeling that he had never rightly appreciated the latter's conversational powers before. When they emerged into the sunlight again, they

encountered Mrs. Pickering and her girls, and in the talk that ensued our hero found himself standing by Addie.

"Percival," she said in a low, quick tone, "don't be surprised. I want to say a word to you. Look as if it were nothing."

Though he was startled, he contrived not to betray it. After the first moment there is small danger of failing to appear indifferent—very great danger of seeming preternaturally indifferent. Percival had tact enough to avoid this. He listened, and replied with the polite attention which was natural to him, but his manner was tinged—any words I can find seem too coarse to describe it—with just the faintest shade of languor, just the slightest possible show of scorn and weariness of the great agricultural show itself. It was not enough to attract notice: it was quite enough to preclude any idea of excited interest.

"I am in a little difficulty," said Addie. "You could help me if you would."

"You may command me."

"You will not mind a little trouble? And you would keep my secret? I have no right to ask, but there is no one—I think you are my friend."

"Suppose me a brother for this occasion; Addie, Waste no more time in apologies."

"A brother! Be it so. Then, my brother, I have to go through Langley Wood to-morrow evening, and I am afraid to go alone."

"I will gladly be your escort. Where shall I meet you?"

"There is a milestone about a quarter of a mile on the road to our house, after you have passed the gate into the wood. Don't come any farther. Somewhere between the gate and that."

"I know it. At what time?"

"Half-past eight, or a few minutes earlier. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly. I will be there."

"If you don't see me before nine don't wait for me. I shall have failed somehow."

"I understand," said Percival.

"I will explain to-morrow. You must trust me till then."

"You shall do as you please. I don't ask for any explanations, remember. Have you been having much croquet lately?"

"Oh, much as usual. Lottie has been beating me, also as usual. We have joined the Fordborough Croquet Club."

"Then I suspect the former members feel small."

"One or two of the best players feel ill-tempered, I think, unless they make-believe very much. Lottie means to win the ivory mallet, she says; and I think she will. Mrs. Rawlinson's sister always considered herself the champion, and I am sure Lottie," etc., etc.

In short, by the time it occurred to anybody that Percival and Addie were talking together, their conversation, carried smoothly on, was precisely what anybody might hear.

The Pickerings went off in one direction, the Blakes in another, and the young men resumed their walk.

"That's over, and the governor not by," said Horace.

"Don't be too secure," was Percival's reply. "Everybody talks about everybody else at Fordborough."

"Well," said Horace, who apparently would not be discouraged, "it's something not to have been standing between the old gentleman and Aunt Middleton, and then to have seen Mrs. Blake sailing straight at one, her face illuminated with a smile visible to the naked eye a quarter of a mile off—eh, Percy?"

"You are a lucky fellow, no doubt," said Percival.

"And, after all, it is quite possible—"

"That you may be a very lucky fellow indeed? Yes, it is quite possible. But I don't quite see what you are after, Horace."

("Nor I," thought Horace to himself, "and that's the charm of it, somehow.")

"Surely it isn't worth while getting into trouble with my grandfather for a mere flirtation."

"If you always stop to think whether a thing is worth while or not, Percy, I wouldn't be you for all the money that ever was coined."

"And if it is more," said the other, not

heeding the remark—"I like fair play, but if it is more—"

"What then?" For Percival hesitated.

"We'll talk of that another time," said the latter. "Not now. Only don't be rash. Look! there's Sissy."

"How pretty she is!" thought Percival, as they went toward her. "What can Horace see in Addie Blake, that he should prefer her? She is a fine girl, handsome—magnificent, if you like—but Sissy is like a beautiful old picture, sweet and delicate and innocent. I can't fancy her with secrets like Addie with this Langley Wood mystery of hers. If it had not been for that ideal of mine—"

They had reached the two ladies.

Meanwhile, Mr. Thorne had listened to more odds and ends of gossip, and had gone on his way, warily searching among the shifting, many-colored groups. He was curious, and in due time his curiosity was gratified. The Blake girls passed him so closely that he could have touched them. They knew perfectly well who he was, and Lottie looked at him, but Addie passed on in her queenly fashion, with her head high, apparently not aware of his existence.

"So," said the old gentleman to himself, "that is Horace's taste? Well, she is very superb and disdainful, and I should think Patent Corn-Flour paid pretty well. She might have bestowed a glance on me, as I suppose she destines me the honor of being her grand-papa-in-law, but no doubt she knows what she is about, and it may be wiser to seem utterly unconscious, as Horace has not introduced us yet. Perhaps he will defer that ceremony a little while longer still. As for the other, she looked me straight in the face, as if she didn't care a rap for any man living. I shouldn't think that girl was afraid of anything on earth—or under it or above it, for that matter. A temper of her own, plainly enough. The beautiful Miss Blake is Horace's taste, of course (I could have sworn to that without a word from him), and ninety-nine out of a hundred would agree with him. But if I were five-and-twenty, and had to choose between them,

I'd take that fierce-eyed girl and tame her!"

Of which process it may fairly be conjectured that it would have ended in total defeat for Mr. Thorne, or in mutual and inextinguishable hatred, or, it might be—for he was hard as well as capricious—in a Lottie like a broken bow. In neither case a very desirable result.

Godfrey Hammond, looking at his watch, and going in the direction of the tent where the potatoes were, perceived Mrs. Rawlinson, and endeavored to elude her. He loathed the woman, as he candidly owned to himself, because he had once nearly approached the other extreme. It was a horrible thought. What had come over him and her? Either she was strangely and hideously transformed—and how could he tell that as fearful a change might not have come to him?—or else his youth was a time of illusion and bad taste. That perfect time, that golden dawn of manhood, when the world lay before him steeped in rosy light, when every pleasure had its bloom upon it, and every day was crowned with joy— Good Heavens! was it *then* that he cared to dance the polka in Fordborough drawing-rooms with Mrs. Rawlinson—Lydia Lloyd as she was of old? Little did that fascinating lady think what disgust at the remembrance of his incredible folly was in his soul as he met her.

For she caught him and shook hands

with him, and would not let him go till she had reminded him of old times as if they might have been yesterday and might be again to-morrow. He smiled, and blandly made answer as if they two were a pair of antediluvian polka-dancers left in a waltzing age to see another generation spinning gayly round. (He could dance quite as well as Horace when he chose.)

Mrs. Rawlinson did not like his style of conversation, and said abruptly, "I had a talk with Mr. Thorne about half an hour ago. I *was* surprised! Mr. Horace Thorne seems to keep the old man quite in the dark."

"Mr. Horace Thorne is a clever fellow, then," said Hammond dryly.

"Oh, you know all about it, I dare say. But really, I *did* think it was too bad. He didn't seem ever to have heard Miss Blake's name. He certainly didn't know her when he saw her."

"Unfortunate man! For Miss Blake so decidedly eclipses the Fordborough young ladies that such ignorance is deplorable. No doubt you did what you could to remove it?"

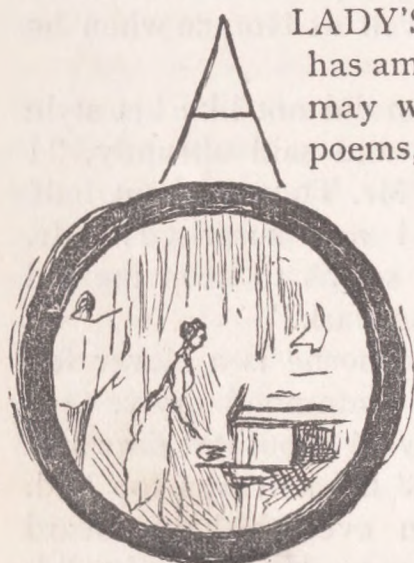
"Well"—Mrs. Rawlinson tossed her blue bonnet—"I really thought I ought to give him a hint: it seemed to me that it was quite a charity."

"A charity—ah yes, of course. Charity never faileth, does it?" And Hammond raised his hat and bowed himself off.



CHAPTER IX.

SISSY LOOKS INTO THE MIRROR.



LADY'S hero generally has ample leisure. He may write novels or poems, or paint the picture or carve the statue of the season, or he is a statesman and rules the destinies of nations, or he makes money mysteriously in the city, or

even, it may be, not less mysteriously on the turf; but he does it in his odd minutes. That is his characteristic. Perhaps he spends his morning in stupendous efforts to gratify a wish expressed in smiling hopelessness by the heroine; later, he calls on her or he rides with her; evening comes, he dances with her till the first gray streak of dawn has touched the eastern sky. He goes home. His pen flies along the paper—he is knee-deep in manuscript; he is possessed with burning enthusiasm and energy; her features grow in idealized loveliness beneath his chisel, or the sunny tide of daylight pours in to irradiate the finished picture as well as the exhausted artist with a golden glory. He has a talent for sitting up. He gets up very early indeed if he is in the country, but he never goes to bed early, or when would he achieve his triumphs? Some things, it is true, must be done by day, but half an hour will work wonders. The gigantic intellect is brought to bear on the confidential clerk: the latter is, as it were, wound up, and the great machine goes on. Or a hasty telegram arrives as the guests file in to dinner. "Pardon me, one moment;" and instantly something is sent off in cipher which shall change the face of Europe. Unmoved, the hero returns

to the love-making which is the true business of life.

There are poetry and romance enough in many an outwardly prosaic life. How often have we been told this! Nay, we have read stories in which the hero possesses a season-ticket, and starts from his trim suburban home after an early breakfast, to return in due time to dine, perhaps to talk a little "shop" over the meal, and, it may be, even to feel somewhat sleepy in the evening. But, as far as my experience goes, the day on which the story opens is the last on which he does all this. That morning he meets the woman with the haunting eyes or the old friend who died long ago—did not the papers say so?—and whose resurrection includes a secret or two. Or he is sent for to some out-of-the-way spot in the country where there is a mysterious business of some kind to be unravelled. At any rate, he needs his season-ticket never again, but changes more or less into the hero we all know.

It is hard work for these unresting men, no doubt, yet what is to be done? Unless the double-shift system can in any way be applied for their relief, I fear they must continue to toil by night that they may appear to be idle men.

And, after all, were the hero not altogether heroic, one is tempted to doubt if this abundant leisure is quite a gain.

Addie Blake, planning some bright little scheme which needed a whole day and an unoccupied squire, said once to Godfrey Hammond, "You can't think what a comfort it is to get some one who hasn't to go to business every day. I hate the very name of business! Now, you are always at hand when you are wanted."

"Yes," he said, "we idle men have a great advantage over the busy ones, no doubt; but I think it almost more than counterbalanced by our terrible disadvantage."

"What is that?"

"We are at hand when we are not wanted," said Godfrey seriously.

And I think he was right. One may have a great liking—nay, something warmer than liking—for one's companions in endless idle *tête-à-têtes*, but they are perilous nevertheless. Some day the pale ghost—weariness, *ennui*, dearth of ideas, I hardly know what its true name is—comes into the room to see if the atmosphere will suit it, and sits down between you. You cannot see the colorless spectre, but are conscious of a slight exhaustion in the air. Everything requires a little effort—to breathe, to question, to answer, to look up, to appear interested. You feel that it is your own fault, perhaps: you would gladly take all the blame if you could only take all the burden. Perhaps the failing *is* yours, but it is your fault only as it is the fault of an electric eel that after many shocks his power is weakened and he wants to be left alone to recover it.

Still, though there may be no fault, it is a terrible thing to feel one's heart sink suddenly when one's friend pauses for a moment in the doorway as if about to return. One thinks, If weariness cannot be kept at bay in the society of those we love, where can we be safe from the cold and subtle blight? As soon as we are conscious of it, it seems to become part of us, and we shrink from the popular idea of the Hereafter, assured of finding our spectre even in the courts of heaven.

Godfrey Hammond expressed the fear of too much companionship in speech, Percival Thorne in action. He was given to lonely walks if the weather were fine—to shutting himself in his own room with a book if it were wet. He would dream for hours, for I will frankly confess that when he was shut up with a book, his book as often as not was in that condition too.

His grandfather had complained more than once, "You don't often come to Brackenhill, Percival, except to solve the problem of how little you can see of us in a given time." He did not suspect it, but much of the strong attraction which drew him to his grandson lay in that very fact. The latter confronted

him in grave independence, just touched with the courteous deference due from youth to age, but nothing more. Mr. Thorne would have thanked Heaven had the boy been a bit of a spendthrift, but Percival was too wary for that. He did not refuse his grandfather's gifts, but he never seemed in want of them. They might help him to pleasant superfluities, but his attitude said plainly enough, "I have sufficient for my needs." He was not to be bought: the very aimlessness of his life secured him from that. You cannot earn a man's gratitude by helping him onward in his course when he is drifting contentedly round and round. He was not to be bullied, being conscious of his impregnable position. He was not to be flattered in any ordinary way. It was so evident to him that the life he had chosen must appear an unwise choice to the majority of his fellow-men that he accepted any assurance to the contrary as the verdict of a small minority. Nor was he conscious of any especial power or originality, so that he could be pleased by being told that he had broken conventional trammels and was a great soul. Mr. Thorne did not know how to conquer him, and could not have enough of him.

It is needful to note how the day after the agricultural show was spent at Brackenhill.

Godfrey Hammond left by an early train. Mrs. Middleton came down to see about his breakfast with a splitting headache. The poor old lady's suffering was evident, and Sissy's suggestion that it was due to their having walked about so much in the broiling sun the day before was unanimously accepted. Mrs. Middleton countenanced the theory, though she privately attributed it to a sleepless night which had followed a conversation with Hammond about Horace.

Percival vanished immediately after breakfast. As soon as he had ascertained that there were no especial plans for the day, he slipped quietly away with his hands in his pockets, strolled through the park, whistling dreamily as he went, and passing out into the road, crossed it and made straight for the river. He lay on the grass for half an hour or so, study-

ing the growth of willows and the habits of dragon-flies, and then sauntered along the bank. Had he gone to the left it would have led him past Langley Wood to Fordborough. He went to the right.

It was a gentle little river, which had plenty of time to spare, and amused itself with wandering here and there, tracing a bright maze of curves and unexpected turns. At times it would linger in shady pools, where, half asleep, it seemed to hesitate whether it cared to go on to the county-town at all that day. But Percival defied it to have more leisure than he had, and followed the silvery clue till all at once he found himself face to face with an artist who sat by the river-side sketching.

The young man looked up with a half smile as Percival came suddenly upon him from behind a clump of alders. A remark of some kind, were it but concerning the weather, was inevitable. It was made, and was followed by others. Young Thorne looked, admired and questioned, and they drifted into an aimless talk about the art which the painter loved. Even to an outsider, such as Percival, it was full of color and grace and a charm half understood, vaguely suggestive of a world of beauty—not far off and inaccessible, but underlying the common, every-day world of which we are at times a little weary. It was as if one should tell us of virtue new and strange in the often-turned earth of our garden-plot. Percival was rather apt to analyze his pains and pleasures, but his ideal was enjoyment which should defy analysis, and he found something of it that morning in the summer weather and his new friend's talk.

It was past noon. The young artist looked at his watch and ascertained the fact. "Do you live near here?" he asked.

Percival shook his head: "I live anywhere. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth. But my grandfather lives in that gray house over yonder, and I am free to come and go as I choose. I am staying there now."

"Brackenhill, do you mean? That fine old house on the side of the hill? I am

lodging at the farm down there, and the farmer—"

"John Collins," said Percival.

"Entertains me every night with stories of its magnificence. Since we have smoked our pipes together I have learnt that Brackenhill is the eighth wonder of the world."

"Not quite," said Thorne. "But it is a good old manor-house, and, thank Heaven, my ancestors for a good many generations wasted their money, and had none to spare for restoring and beautifying. I don't mean my grandfather: he wouldn't hurt it. It's a quaint old place. Come some afternoon and look at it. He shall show you his pictures."

"Thanks," the other said, but he hesitated and looked at his unfinished work. "I should like, but I don't quite know. The fact is, when I have done for to-day I'm to have old Collins's gig and drive into Fordborough to see if there are any letters for me. I am not sure I shall not have to leave the first thing to-morrow."

"And I have made you waste your time this morning."

"Don't mention it," said the young artist with the brightest smile. "I'm not much given to bemoaning past troubles, and I shall be in a very bad way indeed before I begin to find fault with past pleasures. I may not find my letter after all, and in that case I should like very much to look you up. To-morrow?"

"Pray do." The tone was unmistakably cordial.

"Your grandfather's name is Thorne, isn't it? Shall I ask for young Mr. Thorne?"

"Percival Thorne," was the quick correction: "I have a cousin."

They shook hands, but as Thorne turned away the other called after him: "I say! is there any name to that little wood out there, looking like a dark cloud on the green?"

"Yes—Langley Wood." Percival nodded a second farewell, and went on his way pondering. And this was the subject of his thoughts: "Then, my brother, I have to go through Langley Wood to-morrow evening, and I am afraid to go alone."

Of course he had not forgotten his promise to Addie, but having made his arrangements and worked it all out in his own mind, he had dismissed it from his thoughts. Now, however, it rose up before him as a slightly disagreeable puzzle.

What on earth did Addie want toward nine at night in Langley Wood? The day before, in haste to answer her request and anxiety not to betray her, he had not considered whether the service he had promised to render were pleasant to him or not. In very truth, he was willing to serve Addie, and he had professed his willingness the more eagerly that he had expected a harder task. She asked so slight a thing that only eager readiness could give the service any grace at all.

But when he came to consider it he half wished that his task had been harder if it might have been different. He liked Addie, he was ready to serve her, but he foresaw possible annoyances to them both from her hasty request. He had no confidence in her prudence.

"Some silly freak of hers," he thought while he walked along, catching at the tops of the tall flowering weeds as he went. "Some silly girlish freak. Why didn't she ask Horace? Wouldn't run any risk of getting him into trouble, I suppose."

Did Horace know? he wondered. "I'm not going to be made use of by him and her: they needn't think it!" vowed Percival in sudden anger. But next moment he smiled at his own folly: "When I have given my word, and must go if fifty Horaces had planned it! I had better save my resolutions for next time." He did not think, however, that Horace *did* know. "Which makes it all the worse," he reflected. "A charming complication it will be if I get into trouble with him about Addie. Suppose some one sees us? Suppose Mrs. Blake is down upon me, questioning, and I, pledged to secrecy, haven't a word to say for myself? Suppose Lottie— Oh, I say, a delightful arrangement this is and no mistake!"

He could only hope that no one would

see them, and that Addie's mystery would prove a harmless one.

He got in just as they were sitting down to luncheon. Horace and Sissy had spent the morning in archery and idleness, Mrs. Middleton in nursing her headache. Mr. Thorne was not there.

"Been enjoying a little solitude?" Horace inquired.

"Not much of that," was the answer. "A good deal of talk instead."

"What! did you find a friend out in the fields?"

"Yes," said Percival, "a young artist." As he spoke he remembered that he was ignorant of his new friend's name. At least he knew it was "Alf," owing to some story the painter had told: "I heard my brother calling 'Alf! Alf!' so I," etc. Alf—probably therefore Alfred—surname unknown.

They were halfway through their meal when Mr. Thorne came noiselessly in and took his accustomed place. He was very silent, and had a curiously intent expression. Horace, who was telling Sissy some trifling story about himself (Horace's little stories generally were about himself), finished it lamely in a lowered voice. Mr. Thorne smiled.

There was a silence. Percival went steadily on with his luncheon, but Horace pushed away his plate and sipped his sherry. The birds were twittering outside in the sunshine, but there was no other sound. It was like a breathless little pause of expectation.

At last Mr. Thorne spoke, in such sweetly courteous tones that they all knew he meant mischief. "Are you particularly engaged this afternoon?" he inquired of Horace.

"Not at all engaged," said the young man. His heart gave a great throb.

"Then perhaps you could give me a few minutes in the library?"

"I shall be most—" Horace began. But he checked himself and said, "Certainly. When shall I come?"

"As soon as you have finished your luncheon, if that will suit you?"

"I have finished." He drank off his wine, and, without looking at the others, walked defiantly to the door, stood aside

for his grandfather to pass, and followed him out.

Mrs. Middleton and Sissy exchanged glances. "Oh, my dear!" the old lady exclaimed. "Oh, I'm so frightened! I am afraid poor Horace is in trouble. Godfrey Hammond was saying only last night—"

She paused suddenly, looking at Percival. He sat with his back to the window, and the dark face was very dark in the shadow. It was just as well perhaps, for he was thinking "Told you so!" a train of thought which seldom produces an agreeable expression.

"What did Godfrey Hammond say?" Sissy asked. But nothing was to be got out of Aunt Middleton, so they adjourned to the drawing-room to wait for Horace's return. Percival read the paper; Mrs. Middleton lay on the sofa; Sissy flitted to and fro, now taking up a book, now her work, then at the piano, playing idly with one hand or singing snatches of her favorite songs. There was a mirror in which, looking sideways, she could see herself reflected as she played and Percival as he read—as much of him, at least, as was not swallowed up in the *Times*. There is something ghostly about a little picture like this reflected in a glass. It is so silent and yet so real: the people stir, look up, their lips move, they have every sign of life, but there is no sound. There are noises in the room behind you, but the people in the mirror make none. The *Times* may be rustling and crackling elsewhere, but Percival's ghost turns a ghostly paper whence no sound proceeds. Sissy is playing a little tinkling treble tune, but at the piano yonder slim white fingers are silently wandering over the ivory keys, and the girl's eyes look strangely out from the polished surface.

Sissy gazed and mused. Perhaps some day Percival will reign at Brackenhill. And who will sit at that piano where the ghost-girl sits now, and what soundless melodies will be played in that silent room?

Sissy's left hand steals down to the bass, striking solemn chords. "If one could but look into the glass," she thinks, "and see the future there, as people do

in stories! What eyes would look out at me instead of mine? Ah, well! If I could but see Percival there I would try to be content, even if the girl turned away her face. I *would* be content. I would! I would!"

She turns resolutely away from the mirror, and begins that old royalist song in which yearning for the vanished past and mourning for the dreary present cannot triumph over the hope of far-off brightness—"When the king enjoys his own again." To Mrs. Middleton, to Percival, a mere song—to Sissy a solemn renunciation of all but the one hope. Let her king enjoy his own, and the rest be as Fate wills.

The last note dies away. Moved by a sudden impulse, she lifts her eyes to the ghost Percival. He has lowered his paper a little, and is looking at her with a wondering smile. A voice behind her exclaims, "Why, Sissy!" She darts across the room to the speaker and pushes the *Times* away altogether. "Percival," she says in a low, breathless voice, "does Miss Lisle play?"

"Miss Lisle!" He is surprised. "Oh yes, she plays. But not as well as her brother, I believe."

"And does she sing?"

"Yes. I heard her once. But no better than you sang just now. What has come to you, Sissy? You have found the one thing that was wanting."

"What was that?"

"Earnestness, depth. You sang it as if your soul and the soul of the song were one. Now I can tell you that I fancied you only skimmed over the surface of things—like a bird over the sea. I can tell you now, since I was wrong."

Her cheeks are glowing. "And Miss Lisle?" she says.

"What, now, about Miss Lisle?" He is amused and perplexed at Sissy's persistence.

"She is one of your heroic women;" and Miss Langton nods her pretty head. "Oh, I know! Jael and *Judith* and Charlotte Corday."

"I don't think I said anything about Judith: surely *you* suggested her. And, to tell you the truth, Sissy, I looked in

the Apocrypha, and I thought I liked her the least of the trio. It wasn't a swift impulse like Jael's, who suddenly saw the tyrant given into her hands, and it wanted the grace of Charlotte Corday's utter self-sacrifice and quick death. Judith had great honor, and lived to be over a hundred, didn't she? I wonder if she often talked about Holofernes when she was eighty or ninety, and about her triumph—how she was crowned with a garland and led the dance? She ran an awful risk, no doubt, but she was in awful peril: it was glory or death. Charlotte Corday had no chance of a triumph: she must have known that success, as well as failure, meant the death-cart and the guillotine. Judith seems to have played her part fairly well to the end, I allow, but don't you think the praises and the after-life spoil it rather?"

Sissy, passing lightly over Percival's views about Charlotte Corday and the widow of a hundred and five who was mourned by all Israel, pounced on a more interesting avowal: "So you looked Judith out and studied her? Oh, Percival!"

"My dear Sissy, shall I tell you how many times I have seen Miss Lisle?" He was answering her arch glance rather than her spoken question. "How few times, I should say. Twice."

"I've made up *my* mind about people when I've only seen them once," said Sissy, apparently addressing the carpet.

"Very likely: some people have that power," said Percival. "Besides, seeing them once may mean that you had a good long interview under favorable circumstances. Now," with a smile, "shall I tell you all that Miss Lisle and I said to each other in our two meetings?" He paused, encountering Sissy's eyes, brilliantly and wickedly full of meaning.

"What! do you remember every word? Oh, Percival!"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Middleton, lifting her head from the cushion: "listen! isn't that Horace?"

"I think so;" and Percival stooped for the *Times*, which had fallen on the floor. Sissy stood with her hand on his chair, making no attempt to conceal her anx-

iety. The old lady noted her parted lips and eager eyes. "Ah! she does care for Horace. I knew it! I knew it!" she thought.

He came in, looking white and angry: his mouth was sternly set, and there was a fierce spark in his gray eyes. Mrs. Middleton beckoned him to her sofa, and would have drawn the proud head down to her with a tender whisper of "Tell me, my dear." But the young fellow straightened himself and faced them all as he stood by her side. She clasped and fondled his passive hand. "What is the matter, Horace?" she said at last.

"As it happens, there is nothing much the matter," he replied.

"You look as if a good deal might be the matter," said Sissy.

He made no answer for the moment. Then he looked at her with a curious sort of smile: "Sissy, when we were little—when you were very little indeed—do you remember old Rover?"

"That curly dog? Oh yes."

"I used to have him in a string sometimes, and take him out: it was great fun," said Horace pensively. "I liked to feel him all alive, scampering and tugging at the end of the string. It was best of all, I think, to give him an unexpected jerk just when he was going to sniff at something, and take him pretty well off his legs: he was so astonished and disappointed. But it was very grand too, if he would but make up his mind he wanted to go one way, to pull at him and *make* him go just the opposite. He was obstinate, was old Rover, but that was the fun of it. I was obstinate too, and the stronger. How long has he been dead?"

"I'm sure I don't know—twelve or thirteen years. Why?"

"Is it as long as that? Well, I dare say it is. It has occurred to me to-day for the first time that perhaps it was rather hard on Rover now and then.—Aunt Harriet, why did you let me have the poor old fellow and ill-use him?"

"My dear boy, what *do* you mean? I don't think you were ever cruel—not really cruel, you know. Children always

will be heedless, but I think Rover was fond of you."

"I doubt it," said Horace.

"But what do you mean?" The old lady was fairly perplexed. "What makes you think of having poor old Rover in a string to-day? I don't understand."

"Which things are an allegory." Horace looked more kindly down at the suffering face, and attempted to smile. "It was very nice then, but to-day I'm the dog."

"String pulled tight?" said Percival.

"Jerked." He disengaged his hand. "I think I'll go and have a cigar in the park." Percival was going to rise, but Horace as he passed pressed his fingers on his shoulder: "No, old fellow! not to-day—many thanks. You lecture me, you know, and generally I don't care a rap, so you are quite welcome. But to-day I'm a little sore, rubbed up the wrong way: I might take it seriously. Another time."

And he departed, leaving his lecturer to reflect on this brilliant result of all his outpourings of wisdom.

CHAPTER X.

IN LANGLEY WOOD.

AT Brackenhill they invariably dined at six o'clock, nor was the meal a lengthy one. Mr. Thorne drank little wine, and Horace was generally only too happy to escape to the drawing-room at the earliest opportunity. Percival could very well dine at home and yet be true to his rendezvous in Langley Wood.

As the time drew near he became thoughtful and, to tell the truth, a little out of temper. He liked his dinner, and Addie Blake interfered with his quiet enjoyment of it. He would have chosen to lie on the sofa in the cool, quaint, rose-scented drawing-room, and get Sissy to sing to him. Instead of which he must tramp three miles along a dusty white road that July evening to meet a girl he didn't particularly want to see, and to hear a secret which he didn't much want to know, and which he distinctly didn't want to be bound to keep. Decidedly a bore!

It was only twenty minutes past seven when they joined the ladies. Sissy represented the latter force, Aunt Middleton having gone to lie down in the hope of being better later in the evening. Mr. Thorne fidgeted about the room for a minute, and then went off to the library, whereupon Horace stretched himself with a sigh of relief. "Come out, Sissy, and have a turn in the garden."

"But, Percival," she hesitated, "what are you going to do?"

"Don't think about me: I must go out for a little while." He left them on the terrace and started on his mysterious errand. As he let himself out into the road by a little side-gate of which he had pocketed the key, it was five-and-twenty minutes to eight. He had abundance of time. It was not three miles to the white gate into Langley Wood, a little more than three miles to the milestone beyond which he was on no account to go, and he had almost an hour to do it in. Nevertheless, he started on his walk like a man in haste.

The great Fordborough agricultural show lasted two days, and on the second the price of admission was considerably reduced. It had occurred to Percival that the roads in every direction would probably be crowded with people making their way home—people who would have had more beer than was good for them. Addie would never think of such a possibility. It was true that the road from Fordborough which led past Brackenhill would be quieter than any other, but still young Thorne was seriously uneasy as he strode along. It was also true that he met hardly any one as he went, but even that failed to reassure him. "A little too early for them to have come so far, I suppose," was his comment to himself: "at any rate, she shall not wait for me."

He passed the white gate, having encountered only a few stragglers, but before he reached the milestone he saw Addie Blake coming along the road to meet him.

She was flushed, eager, excited, and looked even handsomer than usual. Percival would never fall in love with Addie. That was very certain, but the certainty

did not prevent a quick thrill of admiration which tingled through his blood as she advanced in her ripe dark beauty to meet him. By it, as by a charm, the service which had been almost a weariness was transmuted to a happy privilege, and the half-reluctant squire became willing and devoted.

"You are more than punctual," was his greeting.

She smiled as she held out her hand: "I may say the same of you."

"I was anxious," he confessed. "The roads are not likely to be very quiet to-day. And after sunset—"

"Yes," said Addie. "No doubt it seems strange to you that I should choose this day and this time—"

"I hardly know what I should have done if I had seen nothing of you when I reached the milestone," he went on, interrupting her. His curiosity was awakened now that he was so close to Addie's little mystery, but he was anxious that she should not feel bound to tell him anything she would rather keep to herself—very anxious that she should understand that he would not pry into her secrets.

"If you had gone much farther you would have missed me," she said.

"Which way did you come?"

"I did not come straight from home. Do you see that little red house? I am drinking tea there, and spending a quiet evening."

"How very pleasant!" said Percival. "And who has the privilege of entertaining you?"

"Mrs. Wardlaw. She is the widow of an officer—quite young. She is a friend of mine: she lives with an invalid aunt, an old Mrs. Watson."

"And what does Mrs. Wardlaw think of your taking a little stroll by yourself in the evening?"

"Mrs. Wardlaw asked me there on purpose. Yesterday I saw her at the show, and gave her a little note as we shook hands. This morning came an invitation to me to go and drink tea there. I told mamma and Lottie I should go—papa is out—so one of the servants walked there with me at half-past six, and

will call for me again at ten or a little after."

"Very ingeniously managed," said Percival. "And the invalid aunt?"

"Went up to her room and left Mary and me to our devices," smiled Addie. "A delightful old lady. Ah, here is the wood."

"We shall probably have this part of our walk to ourselves," Percival remarked as he swung the gate open. "People going home from the show are not likely to stop to take a turn in Langley Wood."

The sound of a rattling cart and shouts of discordant laughter, mixed with what was intended for a song, came along the road they had just quitted. Addie took a few hurried steps along the path, which curved enough to hide her from observation in a moment. Safe behind a screen of leaves, she paused: "What horrible people! Is that a sample of what I may expect as I go back?"

"I fear so," said Percival. "I shall see you safe to Mrs. Wardlaw's door."

"You shall see me safe if you have good eyes," she answered. "But you will not go to the door with me."

"Ah!" he said. "Mrs. Wardlaw is only half trusted?"

Addie smiled: "What people don't know they can't let out, can they?"

"Pray understand that you are quite at liberty to apply that very wise—mark me, that very wise—discovery of yours to my case," said Thorne, looking straight at her. "You talked about good eyes just now. Mine are good or bad as it suits me." At any rate, they were earnest as they met hers.

"Don't shut them on my account," said Addie. "No, Percival: you are not like Mrs. Wardlaw. I mean to tell you all about it."

But for a moment she did not speak. They were fairly in the wood; the trees were arching high above their heads; their steps were noiseless on the turf below; outside were warmth and daylight still, but here the shadows and the coolness of the night. A leathern-winged bat flitted across their path through the gathering dusk. "They always look like ghosts," said Addie. "Doesn't it seem,

Percival, as if the night had come upon us unawares?"

As she spoke they reached a little open space. The path forked right and left. "Which way?" said Thorne.

"I don't know, I'm sure. There's a cottage on the farther side of the wood, toward the river—"

"Is that your destination? To the right, then." And to the right they went.

"When you promised to help me," Addie began, "do you remember what you said? I was to consider you as—" She paused, fixing her questioning eyes on him.

"As a brother. What then? Have I failed in my duty already?"

She shook her head, smiling: "Percival, what do you think that means to me?"

"Ah, that's a difficult question. Of course we who have no brothers can only imagine—we cannot know. But I have sometimes fancied that the idea we attach to the word brother is higher because no commonplace reality has ever stepped in to spoil it. For it is an evident fact that some people have brothers who are prosaic, and even disagreeable, while all the noble brothers of history and romance are ours. We may take Lord Tresham for our ideal (you remember Tresham in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon?*), and declare with him—

I think, am sure, a brother's love exceeds
All the world's love in its unworldliness."

"Stop!" said Addie. "You are going into the question much too enthusiastically and much too poetically. I don't know anything about your Tresham. And you mustn't class me with yourself, 'we who have no brothers.' I have one, Percival."

"A brother? You have one? Why, I always fancied—"

"Well, a half-brother." Addie made this concession to strict truth with something of reluctance in her tone, as if she did not like to own that her brother could possibly have been any nearer than he was. "It is my brother I am going to meet to-night."

Percival, fluent on the subject of brothers in general, was so astonished at the

idea of this particular brother or half-brother that he said "Oh!"

"Papa married twice," Addie explained—"the first time when he was very young. I don't think his first wife was *quite* a lady," she said, lowering her voice as if the beeches might be given to gossiping.

Percival would not have been happy as a dweller in the Palace of Truth. He thought, "Then Mr. Blake's two wives were alike in *one* respect."

"And though Oliver was a dear boy," she went on, "he hasn't been very steady. He has had a good deal of money at one time or another, and wasted it; and he and mamma don't get on at all."

"Ah! I dare say not."

"Naturally, she thinks more about Lottie and me; and Oliver has been very tiresome. He was to be in the business with papa, but he didn't do anything, and he got terribly into debt, and then he ran away and enlisted. Papa bought him off, and found him something else to do; but mamma was dreadfully vexed: she said it was a disgrace to the family."

"Did he do better after that?"

"Not much," Addie owned. "In fact, I think he has spent most of his time since then in running away and enlisting. I really believe he has been in a dozen regiments. We were always having to write to him, 'Private Oliver Blake, Number so and so, C company, such a regiment.' It didn't look well at all."

(Addie, as she spoke, remembered how her mother used to sneer, "No doubt some day you'll meet your *brother* in a red jacket with a little cane, his cap very much on one side, and a tail of nursemaids wheeling their perambulators after him." Such remarks had been painful to Addie, but even then she had felt that Mrs. Blake had cause to complain.)

"He was always bought off, I suppose?" said Percival.

"Once papa declared he wouldn't. Oliver went on very quietly for a little while, and was to be a corporal. Then he wrote and said he was going to desert that day week, and he was afraid it might be very awkward for him after-

ward, especially if he ever enlisted again, but he would take his chance sooner than stop. Papa knew he would do it, so he had to buy him off again."

"But is this going on for ever?"

"No: for the last three years Oliver has been in dreadful disgrace, I don't exactly know why, and we were not allowed to mention his name at home. But I don't care," said Addie impetuously: "if he were ever so foolish, and if he had enlisted in every regiment under the sun, he's my brother."

"And Lottie? Does she stand by him as valiantly?"

"Oliver is nothing to Lottie: he never was. He is nine years older than she is, and when she would really begin to remember him he and mamma were always quarrelling. Besides, he always petted me—not Lottie. And now she despises him because he doesn't stick to anything and get on. No—poor old Noll is *my* brother, only mine. No one else cares for him, except papa."

"Mr. Blake hasn't given him up, then?"

"Oh, he is angry with Oliver when they are apart, but he always forgives him when they meet. He was really angry this last time, but Oliver wrote to him, and they made it up. Only, my poor old Noll is to be sent over the sea to Canada with a man papa knows something of."

"And this is good-bye? But surely they can't mind your meeting him before he goes?"

"They do," said Addie. "Papa and mamma saw him in London ten days ago, and he was only forgiven on condition that he went away quietly and said nothing to any one. As if he wasn't sure to tell me! Mamma knows how it has been before: she thinks if papa or I saw him alone he might get round us, and then he wouldn't go. If he is steady and does well there, he is to come and see us all in two years."

"That isn't very long, is it?" said Percival cheerfully. It was evident to him that this black sheep would be much better away.

"Long! Oh no! Only, you see, Oliver

won't do well unless there's something very converting in Canadian air. So I may as well say good-bye to him, mayn't I? Mind, Percival, you are not to think he's wicked. He won't do anything dreadful. He'll spend all the money he can get, and then drift away somewhere."

"A sort of Prodigal Son," Thorne suggested.

"Yes. You won't understand him—how should you? You are always wise and well-behaved, and a credit to every one—more like the son who stayed at home."

"Not an attractive character," was his reply. And he remembered Horace a few hours before: "Not to-day, old fellow: you lecture me, you know." He was startled. "Good Heavens!" he thought, "am I a prig?"

Addie laughed: "Well, I am trusting to you to understand *me*, at any rate. Just like Oliver!" she went on. "He came once, years ago, to stay with old Miss Hayward, who left us the house, and he knew something then of the man at this cottage; so he tells me to meet him there, without ever thinking how I should get to the place by myself at nine at night. Hush! what's that?—Oh, Noll! Noll!"

A man's voice was heard at a little distance singing, and she darted forward, her eyes alight with joy. Percival followed, slackening his pace and listening to Mr. Oliver Blake's rendering of "Champagne Charlie is my name." It ceased abruptly. He doubted what to do, took a step or two mechanically, and came suddenly out on the open space at the farther side of the wood, where was the cottage in question. Addie had run forward and forgotten him. He strolled with elaborate unconsciousness to some palings near by, turning his back on Addie and her brother, rested his folded arms there and gazed at the placid landscape. Below ran the little stream by which he had loitered in the morning, hurrying now in a straighter course, like an idle messenger who finds that time has fled much faster than he thought. The river-mist hung white above the level

meadows, and it seemed to Percival as if Nature, falling asleep, had glided into a pallid and melancholy dream. The last gleams of day were blending with a misty flood of moonlight, beneath which the world lay dwarfed and dark. On the horizon a little black windmill with motionless sails stood high against the sky, looking like a toy, as if a child had set it there and gone to bed.

To Percival, as he stood, came the sound, though not the words, of a rapid flow of talk, broken by a short, often-recurring laugh. But at last there was a pause, and the two came toward him. He turned to meet them, and saw in the moonlight that Oliver Blake was big and broad-shouldered, with black hair, curling thickly under a jaunty cap, and bright restless eyes. Addie had her arm drawn fondly through her brother's.

"Oliver," she said, "this is Percival: you have heard me speak of him."

Oliver bent his head in a blunt, constrained way and looked doubtfully at the other. Percival, who was going to extend his hand, withheld it, and made a stately little bow in return.

"That's very magnificent," said Addie to him.—"Why, Noll," she laughed, "you needn't be so cautious. Percival knows. He is to be trusted."

"Ah!" said Oliver. "What does that feel like, now?"

"What does what feel like?" said Thorne as they shook hands. "Being trusted, do you mean?"

"Ay. Being trusted or being to be trusted. I don't know either sensation myself."

"Not likely, dear boy," said Addie, "with your way of going on. And yet Mr. Osborne must have trusted you, or how did you get the money and get away? You weren't to have any till you sailed, were you?"

"Would you like to know?" said Oliver, his dark eyes twinkling. "I tried to persuade him—no good. Then I told him a—don't be horrified—it was a very fine specimen of fiction—"

"Oliver!"

"Which is no doubt set down to the governor's account."

"Did he believe you?"

"Well, he didn't know what to do. I don't think he would have, only if it wasn't true it was so stupendous, you see. He hesitated, and that made him relax his watchfulness a little. So I gave him the slip and pawned part of my outfit, which we bought together the day before."

"You bad boy!"

"I left him a bit of a note. I told him that if he held his tongue I would surely be there again to-morrow, we'd get the things, and no one would be any the wiser. But if he made a row he might whistle for me, and catch me if he could."

"And you don't know the effect of that, I suppose?" said Percival.

"Well, no. I read it over when I'd done to try and judge it impartially. And I made up my mind—considering the character he'd had of me—that if I were Osborne I should say that Blake meant to back out of his bargain with all he could lay his hands on, and was trying to secure two days' start.—What do you think I did, Addie?"

"Something silly, I've no doubt."

"Well," he said, looking at her with an admiring gaze, which partly explained to Percival the secret of her fondness for her brother, "I thought it was rather clever. I just popped in the letter I had from you, and your photograph, and if that doesn't convince him, I give him up."

"Oh, Noll! How *could* you? What is he like?"

Blake burst out laughing: "Listen to her! A man has got her photograph: he instantly becomes an interesting object.—Oh, he isn't a bad-looking fellow, Addie. I dare say he's glaring at you now through his spectacles."

"Spectacles! Oliver, you've no business to go giving my photograph to all sorts of people. And I hate him too, because if it hadn't been for him perhaps you wouldn't have been going away to Canada."

"What then?" said he philosophically. "Your mother would have had a dear friend on the point of starting for the Cannibal Islands."

Percival began to feel a little anxious about time, and to wonder when the real leave-taking was to commence. He looked at his watch after the manner of a stage-aside, and Addie took the hint.

Five minutes later she came toward him with bent head and averted eyes: "I'm ready, Percival." But they had not gone a dozen steps when she sobbed, "Oh, my poor Noll!" and rushed back. As young Thorne looked after her he heard the quick spurt of a match. Oliver had turned on his heel already and was lighting his cigar. "Heartless brute!" said Percival.

The verdict was unjust. Oliver had taken infinite pains to secure this glimpse of his sister, but since it was over it *was* over. He loved her, and she knew it, but he was not the man to stand sentimentally staring at Addie's back as she disappeared into the shadows of Langley Wood. Now, Percival could not have failed in such a matter, though he might have thought no more about it than did Oliver Blake.

When he and Addie were once more on their way he occupied himself solely with the slight difficulties of her path, but before they had gone halfway she was making an effort to talk in her usual style, and succeeding fairly well. They were just at the place where the paths branched off, and Percival was stooping to disentangle her dress, which was caught on a bramble. As he raised himself he heard an approaching step, and quick as thought he laid his hand on Addie's arm. A couple of yards farther and they would be in the one path, and must meet the newcomer. Standing where they were, it was an even chance: he might pass them or might go the other way. Addie stood breathless, and Percival's heart gave a quick throb, more for Addie's sake than his own. But, after all, it might be no one who knew them, and in that dim light—

The moon glided with startling swift-ness from behind a fleecy cloud and shone on their white faces. The man, passing close by, started and stepped back, recovered himself with a mutter-

ed ejaculation, and said, "Fine evening, Mr. Thorne," as he passed.

"Very," Percival replied. "Good-night."

The other returned a "Good-night, sir," and disappeared in the twilight.

"He knew you," said Addie. She looked frightened. Her parting from Oliver had unnerved her: difficulties which she had made light of in the happiness of anticipation seemed more formidable now. Standing there in the white moonlight and dim shadows of the wood, she suddenly realized the strange and doubtful aspect her expedition with Percival Thorne must wear to ordinary eyes. Nor was her companion likely to reassure her. An air of sombre resolution was more in his line than the light-hearted confidence which would have treated the whole affair as a trifle. He was, as Addie herself had called him, "well behaved." She would have trusted him to the death, only just at that moment a little touch of happy recklessness would have been a greater comfort to her than his anxious loyalty. But Percival could never be reckless: deliberately indifferent he might be, but reckless never.

"He knew you," said Addie, as they resumed their walk.

"Yes, but he would not know you. It does not signify much," was Percival's reply.

"But he does know me."

"Impossible! Oh, you mean he knows your name."

She nodded: "He often passes our house. Always on Thursday, when a lot of people go by. Isn't it a market somewhere?"

"Brookley market. Oh yes, he would go there, no doubt."

"Once or twice I have been walking on the road, and he has driven past. I know his face quite well, and I'm sure—I should think—he knows mine."

"Very likely he may not have recognized you in this half-light," said Percival.

She shivered: "He did. I felt him look right through me."

"Well, suppose he did. After all, there is no reason why we should not take a

walk together on a summer evening if we like, is there?"

"Where is he going?" said Addie. "To the cottage?"

"Oh dear, no! There are endless paths in the wood. He will turn off still more to the right: he cuts off a corner so going from Fordborough to his home."

"Who and what is he?" was Miss Blake's next question as they emerged into the road.

"Silas Fielding. He farms a little bit of old Garnett's land, and I rather think he rents an outlying field or two of my grandfather's. A horsey sort of fellow. I am not particularly fond of Mr. Silas Fielding," said Percival, and they walked a little way in silence.

"You mustn't come any farther," said Addie. "Percival, I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't do it, then. I see no occasion."

"But I see occasion—very great occasion."

"Then we will consider it done," said Percival.

Mrs. Wardlaw's house was very near.

"I'm not late, am I?" said Addie.

He looked at his watch: "A little more than a quarter to ten—very good time. I shall watch you along this last little bit of road, and see you let in. Good-night."

"Good-night." She went quickly away, and he waited as he had promised. She looked back at him once, and saw him stand, dark and motionless like a bronze statue. She reached the garden-gate, and just as a farmer's gig, with one man in it, dashed past, she ran up the little flight of steps, knocked, and was instantly admitted, as if Mrs. Wardlaw stood inside with her hand on the latch. Percival, seeing this, turned to begin his homeward walk, but as the gig rattled up to him its speed was slackened.

"Mr. Thorne! Isn't it Mr. Percival Thorne?"

It was the young artist driving back to the farm in Mr. Collins's old gig, and inducing Mr. Collins's old horse to go at a headlong pace. "I thought it was you standing in the moonlight," he said. "Can't I give you a lift?"

Percival accepted, and they started

off, if possible more vehemently than before.

"I must look sharp," explained the young man whose name was Alf, "or I shall be late at the farm."

"You have only just come from Fordborough?" said Percival.

"No. I put up the horse, and stayed later than I meant. I'd no idea that dull little hole of a town could wake up so. Why, it is flapping with flags from one end to the other. I never saw such a lot of tramps and drunken men in my life."

"Charming idea you have of waking up!"

"And brass bands and gypsies," the other went on. "When I wanted to come away the hostler was drunk and couldn't find the horse, and I couldn't find the gig; that is, I could find a score all exactly like this one, but as to knowing which of all the gigs in the yard belonged to old Collins, I couldn't have told to save my life."

"You got it at last, I suppose?" said Thorne.

The other was cautious: "Well, I got *this*. The man put the horse in somehow, and then he was so far gone he began to talk to himself and undo the harness again. I believe he thought he'd put in a pair by mistake, and was trying to take one out. However, I stopped that, and got away after a fashion."

"They are early birds at the farm, no doubt?"

"Early? Rather! At half-past nine old Collins creaks up stairs, and Mrs. Collins goes into the kitchen and rakes out the cinders for fear of fire. I was out late one night last week, and she couldn't wake the old man up to let me in. It was twenty minutes to eleven."

"Did she come herself?" said Percival. "I know Mrs. Collins by daylight, but I can't imagine Mrs. Collins aroused from her first sleep."

"Where ignorance is bliss.' The dear old lady kept me on the doorstep for ten minutes or so while she was trying to make up her mind whether she would keep her nightcap on, or whether

she would take it off and put on the light-brown front she ordinarily wears. At last she made up her mind to retain the nightcap and add the front by way of a finish. But I have it on her own authority that she was flurried and all of a shake, so she didn't carry out her idea skilfully. The cap was half off and the front was only half on. I saw her forehead getting lower and lower as she spoke to me."

"Could she ever forgive you for seeing her so?"

"Oh yes. I'm rather a favorite, I think. She beamed on me just the same the next morning."

"She did?" said Thorne. "A wonderful woman!"

"I think I shall ask her for a lock of her chestnut hair to-morrow before I go, to show that my faith in it is—well, as implicit as ever. Ah! by the way, I got my letter. I thought most likely I should. I leave the first thing in the morning."

"Sorry to hear it," said Percival. But it occurred to him that the artist's departure would prevent any talk the next day of the circumstances of their meeting that evening. He jumped down, with hasty thanks to his new friend when they came to the little gate. "You'll be in a ditch if you don't look out," he called after him.

"All right!" was shouted back, and old Collins's gig vanished into the outer darkness with the young artist, whom Percival Thorne has never chanced to meet again to this day.

He let himself in with his key and hurried up to the house. The door which opened on the terrace was unfastened as usual. The lights were burning in the drawing-room, but no one was there, and the bright vacant room had a strange ghostly aspect, a little island of mellow radiance in the vast silence and darkness of the night. He felt like one in a dream, and stood idly thinking of the young painter rattling in old Collins's gig to Willow Farm; of Silas Fielding striding across the meadows with thoughts intent on his bargains; of Oliver Blake turning in with a yawn when his cigar was done; of

Addie forcing back her unshed tears and hiding deep in her heart the well-spring of her tenderness for her poor Noll. He had not done justice to Addie Blake. Something of the feeling of underlying beauty, unsought or ignored, which he gained from his artist-friend's talk in the morning, had come to him in a slightly altered form with Addie that evening. With Alf it was the everyday world which revealed new beauty—with Addie it was shown in what Percival had taken for a prosaic and commonplace character. He found himself wondering whether he might not have failed to do justice to others besides Addie. He had looked far away for his ideal, and had found a fair faint dream, when it might be that the reality was close at hand. Since the wayside had blossomed with unexpected loveliness, what grace and charm and hidden treasure might be his prize who should win his way into the fenced garden of Sissy's sweet soul!

He started from his reverie, and was surprised to find that it had lasted only two or three minutes: it seemed to him as if he had been dreaming a long while in that bright loneliness. He walked to the window, with "Where can they all be?" on his lips. And for an answer to his question, standing at the far end of the terrace was Sissy. As he hurried through the hall to join her the library-door opened an inch or two and a voice inquired, "Who is that?"

"It is I—Percival," he answered in haste.

At the word "Percival" the door opened wider, and Mr. Thorne looked out: "Oh! where is Sissy?"

"On the terrace."

"And Horace?"

"I don't know," still chafing to be gone.

"Sissy ought to come in. It's a quarter-past ten." He looked up at the great hall-clock. "Yes, a quarter-past ten, and she will be catching cold."

"I'll tell her."

"Did you come in for a shawl for her? Take her one—anything."

"I will;" and Percival made a dash at the row of pegs and caught down the

first thing which looked moderately like a cloak. Then he escaped.

Sissy was coming to the house, but so leisurely that the journey was likely to take her a considerable time. "At last!" she said as he came up to her: "Why, which way— Oh, it's *you*, Percival!"

"You thought I was Horace?" he said as he put the cloak round her.

"Yes, for the moment I did. What are you muffling me up like this for?"

"Orders," said Percival. "My grandfather said you were to come in, and that I was to bring you a shawl."

"What is the good of this thing if I'm to go in?"

"Very sensibly put. Evidently no good at all. So we will turn round and go to the end of the terrace and back, unless you are tired."

She was not tired.

"And you took me for Horace? I always said we were alike."

"You are not a bit alike."

"Oh no, of course not."

"Don't be absurd," said Sissy. "Anybody's like anybody if it's pitch dark and they don't speak."

"I rather suspect Horace and I might be alike if it were a half-light, and if we *did* speak," said Percival. "Remember the photograph. But where is Horace all this time? What have you been doing with yourself?"

"He's somewhere about," said Sissy. "First of all, we had a little croquet. Then it got too dark to play, so I went to see after Aunt Harriet. Her head was worse; so she said she would go to bed."

"Poor old lady! Best thing she could do. She'll be better to-morrow, I hope."

"Then Horace and I thought we would go and look up his old nurse. She has been teasing me ever so long, wanting to see 'Master Horace,' and it's only across a couple of fields. But she wasn't at home, and the cottage was shut up."

"Gone to Fordborough for the day, most likely."

"I dare say. She has a niece there. Then we came back, and Horace didn't much want to go in, because of this afternoon, you know; so we stayed in the

long walk, and he smoked and we listened to the nightingales."

"Very delightful," said Percival. "The long walk and the nightingales, I mean."

"And then there was a little pinkish light in the sky, and he thought there was a fire somewhere. So he went into the park to get a better view, and after I had waited for him a little while I came up here and met you."

A quick step was heard on the gravel behind them.

"Oh, here you are!" said Horace. "The fire doesn't seem to be anything, Sissy, after all. The light got fainter and fainter, and it's all gone now."

"Where did you think it was?" Percival inquired.

"Well, I thought from the direction that it must be at old Garnett's Upland Farm, but it can't have been much. So you have got back?"

"Yes. Hadn't we better go in? You must mind what you are about, Horace, though it *is* warm. That cough of yours—"

"Stuff and nonsense about my cough!" But he turned to go in nevertheless.

"By the way," said Percival, as he walked between them, "you've been out all the evening: does any one know I've been away?"

"No," said Sissy. "Why, don't you want—"

"I would rather they didn't," he replied. (The stars in their courses seemed to fight for Addie and her secret, had it not been for that untoward meeting with Silas Fielding.)

Horace wore a knowing expression. He was rather pleased that his lecturer should be compelled to seek a pledge of secrecy from him. It made him feel more on a level with the well-conducted and independent Percival. "All right!" he said.

"You may trust me," in a softly earnest voice on the other side.

"Thank you both," said Percival, but his eyes thanked Sissy.

"What have you been after?" asked Horace. "I thought most likely you were off to the friend you met this morning."

The astonishing way in which circumstances conspired to aid in guarding the mystery! "I have been with him," said Percival.

(We value the opinion of others too much very often for our own peace. Queer, unsubstantial things those opinions often are. "I have been with him." Sissy felt a little glow of kindness toward the unknown: it might have been, "I have been with her." She was prejudiced in his favor, and sure that he was a nice fellow. Horace was ready to stake something on his conviction that he was a bad lot, this fellow Percy had picked up, and that Percy knew it.)

Percy was still warm with the chivalrous devotion which had been kindled in him that evening. It was reserved for the colder morning light to reveal to him that what with Lottie on the hillside and Addie in Langley Wood he was plunging into little adventures which were hardly consistent with the character of a most prudent young man. Yet such was the character he was supposed to have undertaken to support in the world's drama.

They reached the door, and Horace went in, but Sissy lingered yet a moment on the threshold. "Isn't it all beautiful?" she said, taking one more look: "if it could only last!"

Percival smiled: "Sissy, have *you* learnt that?"

"November—bare boughs and bitter winds—I hate to think of it," she said.

"I would say, 'Don't think of it,' but it would be no good," he replied. "When the thought of change has once occurred to you while you look at a landscape, it is a part of every landscape thenceforward. But it gives a bitter charm."

"Spring will come again," she said; "but death and parting and loss—they are so dreadful! And growing old! Oh, Percival, why must they all be?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "The whole world echoes your 'Why?' Sissy, I wish I could help you, but I can't. I can only tell you that I understand what you feel. It is very terrible looking forward to age—to loss of powers,

hopes and friends. One feels sometimes as if one could not tread that long gray road to the grave."

Sissy shivered as if she saw it drawn out before her eyes.

"But after all it may be brighter than we think," he went on after a pause. "There is joy and beauty in change, as well as bitterness. If everything in the world were fixed and unalterable, would not that be far more terrible? As it is, we have all the possibilities on our side. Who knows what gladness may grow out of endless change?" Yet even as he spoke he was conscious of a wild, impotent longing to snatch her—she was so delicate and sweet—from beneath the great revolving wheels of time, with a cry of

Stay as you are, and be loved for ever.

But the poet's very words carry the sentence of doom in the memory that the blossom to which they were uttered must have perished years ago.

"Sissy," he said suddenly, "surely there cannot be much suffering reserved for you. Oh, poor child! I wish I could take it all in your place." He spoke in all earnestness, yet could he have looked into the future he would have seen that her suffering would not be long, but very keen, and his not to bear, but to inflict.

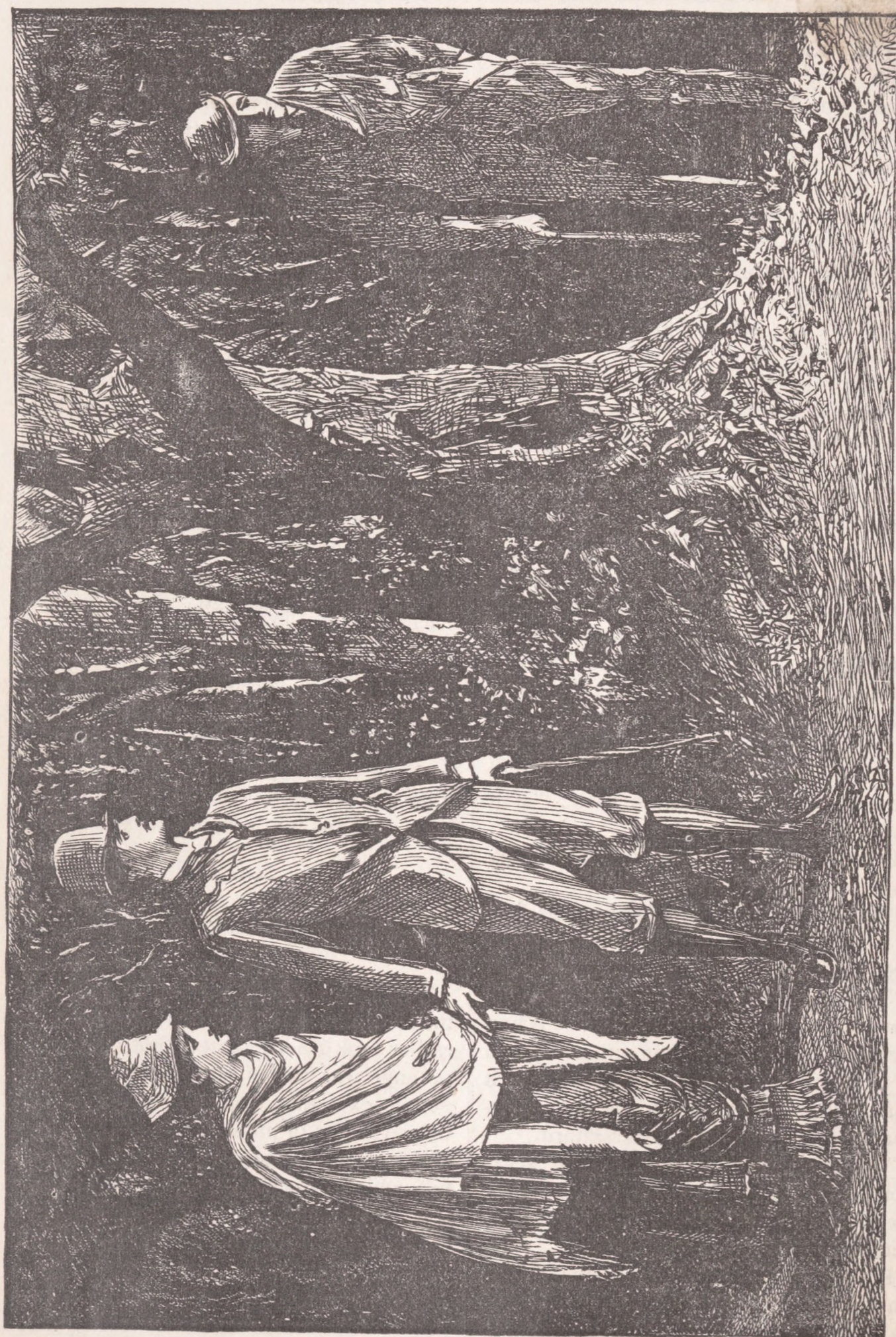
CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE.

PERCIVAL THORNE had never thought much on the subject of revenge. He rather took it for granted that deliberate revenge was an extraordinary and altogether exceptional thing. People give way to bursts of passion which pass away and leave no trace: they are so hot with fury which comes to nothing at all that at the first glance it seems as if the anger which bears fruit must be something different in kind. But it is possible that if Percival had considered the matter he might have arrived at the conclusion that revenge does not depend only on intensity of passion, but on intensity of passion and aptness of opportunity together.

Disembodied hate soon dies unless it is fiendish in its strength.

He had had fair warning at the birthday party. Lottie, smarting with humilia-



"ADDIE STOOD BREATHLESS, AND PERCIVAL'S HEART GAVE A QUICK THROB."—Page 57.

tion, had looked him full in the face with a flash of such bitter enmity as springs from the consciousness of one's own folly. And Lottie's eyes conveyed their

meaning well. That very afternoon, when Percival looked up as he lay on the turf at her feet, they had been most eloquent of love. "Foolish child!" he had thought, "she is only seventeen to-day, and childish still." When he encountered the sudden flash of hate he would hardly have been surprised at some instant manifestation of it. Had she carried a dagger, like

Our Lombard country-girls along the coast,

vengeance might have come at once. But she spoke to him later in her ordinary voice, and touched his hand when she bade him good-night; and it was only natural to conclude that nothing would follow her glance of fury. Something of bitterness might linger for a while, but Lottie was only seventeen, and that afternoon she had loved him.

He was right enough. There was nothing fiendish in Lottie's hatred: it would soon have spent its strength in helpless longings and died. But that very night it flew straight to Horace Thorne, and unobserved found shelter there. It assumed a shape not clearly defined as yet, but a shape which time would surely reveal. It drew Lottie to the young man's side while the tears of pain and shame were hardly yet dry upon her burning cheeks.

In spite of the talk on her birthday morning, Lottie hardly understood the relative positions of the Thornes. Percival was disinherited and Horace was the heir. Naturally, she supposed that Horace was the favorite, and that the old man was displeased with Percival. She concluded that the small income of which the latter had spoken was probably a grudging allowance from Mr. Thorne. His grandfather protected and patronized him now, and no doubt it would be in Horace's power to protect and patronize him hereafter. Lottie hardly knew what she dreamed or wished, but she felt that she should indeed be avenged if the dole might in any way be regulated by her caprice, given or withheld according to the mood of the moment.

Meanwhile, Percival drifted contentedly on, unconscious that Lottie had vow-

ed vengeance and Sissy devotion. Mr. Thorne went about with an air of furtive triumph, as if he were tasting the sweetness of having outwitted somebody. Horace divided his time between divers pleasures, but contrived to run down to Fordborough once just before he went yachting with a friend. He took to letter-writing with praiseworthy regularity, and yet his accustomed correspondents were curiously unaware of his sudden energy. He too had his look of triumph sometimes, but it was uneasy triumph, as if he were not absolutely certain that some one might not have outwitted him. Oliver Blake on board the good ship Curlew had passed the period of seasickness, and was flirting desperately with a lively fellow-passenger, while Addie followed him with anxious thoughts. About this time his father went in secret to consult a London doctor, and came away with a grave face and a tender softening of his heart toward his only son. A visit to his lawyer ensued, and of this also Mrs. Blake knew nothing. The girls played croquet as before, Lottie won the ivory mallet on the great field-day of the Fordborough club, and Mrs. Rawlinson and Miss Lloyd hated her with their sweetest smiles. Week after week of glorious weather went by. Brackenhill lay stretched in the sleepy golden sunshine, and the leaves in Langley Wood, quivering against the unclouded blue, had lost the freshness of the early summer. The shadows and the sadness were to come.

CHAPTER XII.

Well, what's gone from me?

What have I lost in you?—R. BROWNING.

PERCIVAL awoke one day to the consciousness that the world was smaller, grayer and flatter than he had supposed it. At the same moment he became aware that a burden was lifted from his shoulders and that a disturbing element was gone out of his life.

This is how the change in the universe was effected. Percival met Godfrey Hammond, and they talked of in-

different things. As they were parting Hammond looked over his shoulder and came back: "I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. Have you heard that the young lady with the latent nobility in her face is going to be married?"

"What young lady?" said Percival stiffly. He knew perfectly well, and Hammond knew that he knew.

"Miss Lisle."

"No, I hadn't heard. Who is he?"

"The happy man? Lord Scarbrook's eldest son."

"Who told you?"

"You are incredulous, but I fear I can't soften the blow. The man who told me heard Lisle talking about it."

"There's no blow to soften," said Percival. "I assure you I don't feel it."

"Ah," said Hammond, "there was once a man who didn't know that his head had been cut off till he sneezed—wasn't there? Take great care of yourself, Percival." And nodding a second farewell Godfrey left him, and Percival went on his way through that curiously shrunken world.

And, after all, the blow was premature. Mr. Lisle had only talked of a probability which he earnestly hoped would be realized.

But Percival did not doubt it. He tried to analyze his feelings as he walked away. He had known but little of Judith Lisle, but when first he saw her face he felt that the vague dream which till then had approached, only to elude him, in clouds, in fire, in poems, in flowers, in music, had taken human shape and looked at him out of her gray eyes. Percival had no certain assurance that she *was* his ideal, but from that time forward he pictured his ideal in her guise.

He did not dream of winning her. Mr. Lisle had boasted to him one evening, as they sat over their wine, of all that he meant to do for his daughter, and of the great match he hoped she would make. Percival had a feeling of peculiar loyalty to Mr. Lisle as the friend whom his dead father had trusted most of all. He could not think of Judith, for he could never be a fit husband for her in Mr. Lisle's eyes. Had he been heir to Brackenhill— But he was not.

So he acquiesced, patiently enough. He did not attempt to do anything. What was there to do? By the time that he had struggled through the crowd and got his foot on the first round of that ladder which *may* lead to fortune, Judith would probably be married. He did not even know certainly that she was the woman he wanted to win. Why should he force the lazy stream of his existence into a rough and stony channel that he might have a chance—infinitesimally small—of winning her.

Yet there were moments of exaltation when it seemed to him as if his acquiescence were tame and mean—as if his life would miss its crown unless he could attain to his ideal. At such moments he felt the stings of shame and ambition. Yet what could he do? The mood passed, and left him drifting onward as before.

But now all thought of Judith Lisle was over. Even if she were in truth his ideal woman, it was certain that she was no longer within his reach. That haunting possibility was gone. All that it had ever done for him was to make him dissatisfied with himself from time to time, and yet he found himself regretting it.



CHAPTER XIII.

SHADOWS.



IN the early autumn there was sorrow in the little white house at Fordborough. Mr. Blake died suddenly, and after his death it appeared that he had known of his danger and made ready for the end. He had carried his terrible secret in his heart, and worn a smile on his face, and kissed his girls, and noticed how the acacia and the laburnums were growing, and rated John the gardener, who was drunk one evening when he came to shut up the bright little observatory. He read the reports of Mr. Gladstone's speeches with his usual care, made his usual jokes, and never uttered a word that was not altogether prosaic and commonplace. And at last he passed away quite quietly, as if he had a business appointment with Death. It was not heroism, but it seemed a little like it, this calmness in facing the inevitable mystery in the midst of that unconscious little circle.

There was sorrow in the little villa, but there was bitterness too. Mr. Blake's will was not to be disputed, but his widow could find no words too strong to condemn it. It had been made when his heart was softened toward his son. He had provided for his wife and daughters, but Oliver's share was larger. Mrs. Blake could not forgive this, nor could she pardon the dead man that the earn-

ings of his life were less than she had calculated; and as soon as she could she left Fordborough.

Mother and daughters travelled together no farther than to London. There Addie went to her father's sister, to await Oliver's return from exile, and Mrs. Blake and Lottie started for Folkestone, talking of choosing some quiet place on the Continent where they might spend the winter.

If there was sorrow at the little white villa, there was bitter trouble at Brackenhill. The slow weeks wore away beneath an overhanging cloud, whose sullen gloom might at any moment be broken by a fatal flash. It was not difficult to say what was the matter with Horace that autumn—a neglected cold, a terrible cough, a hurried consultation of doctors, a sentence of banishment or death. Poor Horace! Mrs. James Thorne went abroad with her son, and Aunt Harriet came back from town almost heart-broken.

But what was amiss with Sissy? She went about the old house with drooping head and listless step. The delicate color fled slowly from her face, and left a cheek pale as a tea-rose. A word, a look, would send her hand to her heart. She was restless and anxious, and there were dark shadows beneath her eyes. Any remark on her low spirits was met with a sudden gayety as like her old gladness as fireworks are like sunshine. She declared that her appetite was good, and indeed she sometimes ate with an eager craving very unlike a healthy hunger. She persisted that she slept even better than usual, and it was true that her eyes unclosed more reluctantly when morning came; but Aunt Harriet was sure that hours of wakeful tossing ended in the heavy slumber of exhaustion. "If one eats well and sleeps well," said Sissy, "there's not much amiss. You are dear kind people, but oh what nonsense you do talk!"

Mr. Thorne said, "The child is fretting about Horace. He'll never fret about her." But this explanation did not satisfy Mrs. Middleton. The first symptoms of Sissy's mysterious malady had preceded Horace's peril; and she said so.

"I know," Mr. Thorne replied, nodding his head. "All the same, Horace is at the bottom of it. You don't understand. You can't. Well, I'll see what I can do."

"For Horace? If you get the chance," said Mrs. Middleton bitterly. "Oh, Godfrey, I sometimes think that neither you nor I shall do much more for Horace and Sissy."

Mr. Thorne's sudden ejaculation was like an angry snap. He poked the wood-fire furiously till the sparks went up the chimney in a fierce stream, then, poker in hand, he looked up at the old lady's melancholy face: "How can you stand there and talk such folly? This isn't the first time the boy has been ill: he'll come back to you all right in the spring. Of course he will! He *must*!" This with another assault on the big log.

"I wish I dared think so," said Mrs. Middleton. "But I was dreaming of poor Jim last night: you sent him away just the same, and—"

"And he came back strong and obstinate enough to insist on making a fool of himself in spite of me—just as Horace will: see if he doesn't!" was the quick reply. "And you know what a poor, puny fellow Jim was. Don't talk rubbish! Sissy too! As if girls didn't always have their little imaginary ailments! She isn't going to die—not she!"

"Imaginary!" said Mrs. Middleton. It was only one word, but the tone spoke volumes.

"Oh, she believes in it," her brother replied. "Get a doctor. But whatever he calls it, the plain English will be want of occupation."

"Sissy had better have been brought up to scrub floors and make bread perhaps," was the retort.

"Why? At that rate I might as well give up magnolias and stephanotis, and take to growing buttercups and dog-

roses. They would be hardier. No, I like my hot-house flowers. God knows I don't want to lose this one. I tell you she is fretting about Horace. I'll talk to her."

"If she is fretting about Horace—" said Mrs. Middleton, as she went away.

Her brother got up and unlocked a drawer in his writing-table. He took out a folded paper and looked at it, without attempting to open it: merely to hold it in his hand gave him a sense of power. Formidable as it looked, it was nothing—not worth the paper it was written on—unless, indeed, he touched the bell, which was within easy reach, summoned a couple of servants, and put that formal trembling signature of his at the end. Then that blue paper would be worth—Brackenhill.

He handled it, laid it down, eyed it from a distance, walking softly to and fro, came near again, and stood looking at it.

"What would Hardwicke say?" And the thought of that respectable lawyer, astonished and discomfited, made Mr. Thorne smile, as he did sometimes, with one side of his mouth only. He took another turn and came back.

"He'd say that three generations of Hardwicks were trusted by the Thornes till old Godfrey Thorne had a job to do he was ashamed of, and took it to Mitchell of Stoneham."

Yet another turn and another halt.

"He sha'n't say it. He shall make the will himself. He shall never say that I was ashamed of doing justice to Percival. He shall do it—not just yet, with Horace ill and away, but it shall be done."

For a moment he looked half inclined to throw Mr. Mitchell's work on the fire, but he ended by locking it in the drawer again. "I won't sign it," he said. "There would be endless talk if I made any alteration in my will just now; and I shouldn't care to do it, either. But it shall lie there till I can go to Hardwicke. I shall be happier knowing that five minutes will make all right if there should be any need."

Under these thoughts lay the con-

sciousness that there might be no need whatever for the will. The contempt with which he treated Mrs. Middleton's forebodings was not as real as he wished it to be. He felt the loneliness of his position very keenly, and was aghast at the widening circle of death in which he stood as if his existence were charmed. He was almost ready to believe that his own life flourished in some subtle atmosphere which was deadly to those around him. He was strong and well, conscious of no failure or decay from year to year, and the bright young lives which had grown up in his shadow had passed away or were passing now. He shivered at the thought of his horrible solitude as he warmed his veined hands at the blaze. He had gloried in his power over Horace and Brackenhill, and now Horace was gliding out of his reach into the shadows. He had plotted against the lad, yet it was dreadful to think that the bright, handsome fellow, who shot so well and rode so fearlessly, and made friends wherever he went, should be beyond all services but those of a nurse for a little while, and then of the gravedigger and the parson, and should not care for any landed estate except the seven-foot one which Harold Godwinsson offered to his foe. No one had such cause for thinking ill of Horace as had old Mr. Thorne, but he was sorry for the boy as he sat by the fireside, and the more sorry because he felt himself a conqueror.

Thank God, he had Percival still! No sorrow could cut him to the heart while Percival remained—Percival, who had never known what a day's illness meant, who was almost as independent of him in his prosperity as was Horace in the shadow of death: almost, but not quite. He could make Percival a rich man yet, and he would do it.

His soul was filled with a great longing to look on his boy's face then and there. He felt as if his dreams of death and loneliness would vanish if he might but touch the hand whose soft strong grasp he knew so well. Percival had very beautiful hands, firm, smooth, olive-skinned—the hands of an idle man. "Ah! they shall never have any need

to work," smiled Mr. Thorne as he held his own to the fire. And though Percival was indifferent to many of the things which young men generally enjoy, he had some tastes which his grandfather could gratify. Dick Garnett had said that there was some pleasure in giving that young fellow a good glass of wine—he knew when he had one; and a dinner too—he could dine, not merely feed. Old Garnett considered that most people, and especially young people, took what they supposed was needful to support existence in an ignorant manner which was beneath contempt. But Percival was an exception to this rule, and Mr. Thorne found pleasure in recalling Garnett's verdict. True, these tastes and enjoyments were material, low; but if he could not apprehend Percival in his nobler desires, it was something to seize him thus. Let the boy put on his tragic, musing face and air of unfathomable mystery, let him roam where he would in dreams: he must needs come home to dinner. And if behind that somewhat romantic exterior lurked a budding epicure, a connoisseur when priceless vintages should be in question, would he not think kindly of the old man who should save him from many a day of hashed mutton and cheap sherry?

Arriving at this point in his meditations, Mr. Thorne smiled again, and went in search of Sissy. He found her curled on the rug in the drawing-room with a novel in her hand. As he approached she gathered up all her energies and smiled.

"Sissy," he said abruptly, "are you fretting about Horace?"

"I? Oh no! no!"

He shook his head: "I fear you are."

"No, indeed—no. I am sorry he is ill, poor Horace!"

"Ah yes. But I didn't mean fretting about his illness only."

"I know, I know. There is nothing else—really nothing. You must do what you like. You know best."

"I ought to be just, you know," said Mr. Thorne. "But I don't want to be hard on Horace, and I don't want you to suffer."

"Don't think of me: there is no need. You must decide."

"You haven't quarrelled with him?"

"Quarrelled! I never dreamt of such a thing."

"Because if this were a little tiff," said Mr. Thorne, "there might be a chance of a reconciliation. Horace has been to blame, but he will never marry that girl."

"What girl?" said Sissy mechanically.

"This Miss Blake."

She sat pulling at the tassel which hung from a cushion close by: "No—I don't think he will." There was an under-current of painful meaning in her tone, and her little face was suddenly flushed with a rosy glow.

"Then it is his deceit you cannot forgive—his word, solemnly, voluntarily pledged to me, and broken before the day was done? But are you sure you will not change—will not pardon him some day?"

Sissy leant against an arm-chair, and laid her face down on her curved arm, as if she were weary: "Don't mind me—don't. You can decide."

The door at the far end of the room opened, and a servant announced that Mr. Garnett was outside. He wanted to speak to Mr. Thorne for a moment, but would not get off his horse. The old man went. When the door closed behind him Sissy sat up. Her lips were white, her hands trembled: "He'll find me out some day, and he'll be so angry! Oh, and Horace! I shall never be a heroine—never. Judith wouldn't have been frightened at such a little bit of a secret. If they scold me, what shall I do? No one ever has scolded me, and I couldn't bear it—I know I couldn't."

She rocked herself to and fro, with her little hands tightly clasped and her melancholy eyes fixed on the empty air. "Poor Horace!" she said to herself. Then she was still, as if she were trying to find some little shred of courage somewhere in her heart. "It is all for Percival," she whispered at last, "for Percival—Percival!" And across her face there passed the pale remembrance of a smile.

CHAPTER XIV.

GODFREY HAMMOND PRESCRIBES.

GODFREY HAMMOND paid a flying visit to Brackenhill, and was startled at the signs of Sissy's illness. "What is amiss?" he asked.

Mrs. Middleton shook her head.

"Can't you find out? *Something* is wrong: she is literally pining away."

"I know it."

"Won't she tell you?"

"She persists that there is nothing whatever the matter with her."

"Have you had a doctor?"

"She won't see one, but I spoke to Dr. Grey about her. He said, 'Try cod-liver oil,' but she won't touch it."

"Cod-liver oil! The man's an idiot!" and Godfrey Hammond walked off with a thoughtful frown.

He watched his opportunity, and caught Sissy in the library the next afternoon. Mr. Thorne was safely shut up in his study with his agent, Mrs. Middleton had gone into the village to see a sick woman; so Hammond had it all to himself. Sissy was turning the pages of a magazine, and there was silence for a minute while he skimmed a column of the *Times*. Then she looked up, suddenly conscious that his eyes were fixed on her.

"I'm sorry to see you are not looking so well as usual," he said.

"There's nothing the matter with me, really."

"Pardon me, but I think there is."

"No, indeed, no! Why I have *such* an appetite—sometimes" (seeing Hammond's quick glance and arching brows), "and I sleep so well it's quite a trouble to get up. And if I eat well and sleep well," said Sissy, clinging to her poor little formula, "there *can't* be very much the matter with me, you know."

"Hm!" said Godfrey. "Mr. Thorne and Mrs. Middleton are rather inclined to agree with *me*, I think."

He sat on the arm of a chair, swinging one foot with an affectation of carelessness which his watchful eyes belied. They were light gray, and not very noticeable in themselves, but half that intensity of expression would have made eyes like Lottie's absolutely burn. Sissy

came and knelt on the seat of the chair, and looked up at him with an anxious face.

"They always agree with you," she said with innocent flattery. "You can make them think just what you like. Do tell them not to mind me. I should be quite well if they would only let me alone—I should indeed. I am telling you the truth. Oh, don't you know I am telling you the truth? Don't let them tease me any more."

"Then, Sissy, you must get well, you know," said Hammond; and as he spoke he put his left arm round the girl's waist. He had been a young man at Brackenhill when Sissy was a tiny child, and many a time had she sat on his knee and kissed him. But when she grew up he had dropped the familiar "Sissy" in speaking to her, fancying that it sounded paternal and as if he were very old indeed. He could not address her as "Miss Langton," but he had carried the art of speaking to her without using any name at all to a high degree of perfection; and if a name were absolutely necessary, he would call her "St. Cecilia," a title which she had earned one day at the piano. He had grown formal in manner too, not assuming any rights as an old friend. But now, moved by a quick impulse, he called her Sissy and put his arm round her waist, and, as he did so, he felt her heart fluttering, and his own gave a little answering throb.

Sissy was surprised, but grateful too. This tenderness from Godfrey Hammond, who was ordinarily so cold, moved her strangely. Just when she longed for sympathy, to find it where she would never have sought it was a boon like waters in a thirsty land. Here was one who might continue kind even if others were estranged. It was pleasant to feel that protecting arm about her, though she found it bewildering too as she looked at Hammond's hand, white and with a great signet-ring upon it. Her own lay passively in his firm palm, clasped by his slim hard fingers. "Oh, I shall get well," she whispered softly.

"Sissy," he said, "shall I tell you what is the matter with you?" How plainly

he could feel that fluttering heart! As he spoke there was a pause, and then a frightened bound, and looking down he saw that even her lips grew white as he spoke. She believed in his keen sagacity: it was the fashion at Brackenhill. "The child has some foolish little secret," he thought, but he hastened to say, "You want change, my dear girl: everybody does sometimes. Shouldn't you like to go away—I don't mean for any of your seaside nonsense: I hate the seaside, shrimps and bathing-machines and lath-and-plaster crescents—but really away out of your every-day life? Venice—Florence—Rome,—what do you say?" She was looking up, with pleasure dawning in her eyes, and Hammond, encouraged, went on: "Or why not farther still—say to the East at once—eh, Sissy? Alexandria—Cairo—turbans and veils—camels and deserts—tents—Arabs—minarets—palm trees—pyramids, and the rest of it? Like Eothen, you know."

She drank in his bald, disjointed talk as if he brought tidings from Paradise: "Ah, I should like *that*!"

"Well, why not?" said Hammond, observing her closely. "What have these good people to do, that they need live as if they were rooted here? Shall we get them to take you away, Sissy? No dull English winter, but summer weather till June comes round again."

All the brightness was gone at once, like April sunshine blotted out by a rain-cloud: "Oh no: I think not. They wouldn't like it, and perhaps it is best as it is. I don't really believe I want anything, if they would only let me be quiet. But it is very good of you to think about me—Godfrey." The name came with just a slight hesitation, and there was a little awakening tremor of her hand in his, as if she feared that the protecting clasp might be abruptly withdrawn.

It was not. Hammond only said, "Ah! you wouldn't care to go abroad just at present?"

She caught at his words: "No—not just now, with poor Horace away and ill, you know. Some other time, I think, I should like it very much indeed."

She would not have minded letting

Godfrey think that Horace's illness was the cause of her trouble, though she had denied it to Mr. Thorne. Godfrey knew how like brother and sister they had been: what more natural than that she should be sad when her brother was in danger? But Hammond had seen the quick delight, followed by as quick despondency, and was not to be blinded. "She wants to escape from the people," he mused, still with his arm about her, "not from the place. Some foolish, innocent little secret—something one could most likely set right in about five minutes if one only knew it; but she is afraid to speak, and tortures herself with all sorts of imaginary terrors. Poor child! if one could but take her away from these worthy folks, and from her troubles too!"

His silence alarmed Sissy: "Don't be vexed with me if I am stupid, Godfrey: I don't think I can help it."

"Vexed!" Something in his tone startled both himself and her, and she looked up and met his eyes. For a moment their souls drew very close to each other—for one moment: later they would have laughed at the mere idea, but it was true—their two lives were within a hair's breadth of melting into one. Her wistful eyes, her trouble, her loneliness, her supreme charm of beautiful youth, would, I verily believe, have drawn a surprising question from Hammond's lips could he but have been certain of the answer. But if Sissy should laugh at him?

She would not have laughed: I think she would have said "Yes." I am sure she would have said "Yes" if she could have married him then and there, have left all her perplexities behind her, and have travelled with him into the wonderful far-off East of which he talked. Percival had gone away, to Miss Lisle or to—ah! no matter; and when a girl is conscious of being helpless and alone the temptation to find a refuge in a marriage built on something less than love may assail her with almost irresistible force. Esteem, gratitude, implicit trust,—will not these suffice? Surely they must. There is nothing to alarm her in the lifelong pledge: the one thing she desires is to feel that her refuge is

lasting and secure. She weighs his kindness, not against the joy of perfect marriage, but against the sadness of her lonely life. Yet it will not do, though it may be useless to say so—it will not do if she has learnt the meaning of Love, hardly if she is capable of it.

So it was well for Sissy that Hammond hesitated, fearing to be ridiculous, and then became aware that the tide of passion and sympathy had ebbed as quickly as it flowed, and that the moment which had held such startling possibilities had fled, just as common moments fly. He sighed a little, partly in regret, partly in relief. True, it might be that he had missed something of Paradise, but on the other hand it was very likely that he had escaped making a fool of himself. Balancing the one against the other, there he remained—Godfrey Hammond, forty-four, with a reputation for sagacity, saying with fluent ease, "Vexed, my dear Sissy? no: why should I be? How can you imagine such a thing? But I still think a little change would—" And so on, loosening his clasp of her little hand as he spoke.

Mrs. Middleton waylaid him before he left Brackenhill: "What do you think, Godfrey? Shall I take her to town and consult some one? Whom would you recommend? Or what shall I do? Give me your advice."

"You won't take it if I do," said Godfrey, rolling up his umbrella with a neatness which was almost miraculous.

"Why not? What is it?"

"Well," said Godfrey, "if I were you I should—leave her alone."

"Leave her alone? Stand by and see her getting paler and thinner every day?"

"Didn't I tell you? Very well," said the oracle, "she wants change—something or somebody. Ask Percival down."

Now Hammond knew that Percival had lost his dream.

CHAPTER XV.

"AS OTHERS SEE US."

A DAY or two later Mrs. Middleton found Sissy looking over photographs—

a very harmless occupation, which would have passed unnoticed but that the girl started and half closed the album as her aunt came in. She was aware of her foolishness when it was too late, and did her best to mend it. With a careless little laugh she laid the book down open at the portrait which she had been examining. It was the photograph Percival had given her—Bertie Lisle, the handsomest man in her album.

Sissy followed the direction of the old lady's eyes. "Isn't he perfect?" she said. "Shouldn't you like to see him, Aunt Harriet?"

Aunt Harriet expressed a moderate willingness to look at the young man if he came in her way.

"I wish he would come in *my* way," says Sissy frankly. "I like to see very beautiful people. I wish he would walk in at that door now."

"I don't," said Mrs. Middleton. "Godfrey hates the very name of Lisle: he can't bear that man's father. It would be very awkward to have to remark to your charming young hero, 'I'm afraid you won't think me civil if I don't ask you to dinner, but I'm sure you won't think my brother civil if I do.' Unpleasant, wouldn't it be?"

"Dinner!" Sissy tossed her pretty head. "I wasn't thinking of anything so commonplace as dining with him. I suppose he *does* dine. Dear me! I never thought of that before."

"I should think he did. But what were you going to do with him, then? Waltz?"

"No, I don't care so much about waltzing as I used to, I think." And then, after a pause, "Nobody waltzes like Percival."

"What, then? If you don't want him for dinner-parties or balls—"

"Oh dear, no!" said Sissy—"nothing of the sort. No, I was thinking he would do very nicely to run away with."

"My dear Sissy! What *do* you mean?"

"Something like Jock o' Hazeldean;" and she sang a snatch of the old song. "How could one say 'No'—how could one be expected to say 'No'—to him, with a face like that?" And she point-

ed to the album, where Bertie looked out with a face almost girlishly beautiful, it is true, but with a lively, laughing audacity which might qualify him to be the hero of such an exploit as she suggested. "Who could wonder if one went off with him to the world's end? Suppose William came in with a message, 'Mr. Lisle's compliments, m'm, and he's waiting with a chaise-and-four at the little gate, and the horses are rather fresh this morning:' wouldn't you catch up your tatting and go?"

"With four frisky horses and no bonnet on? No, thank you. Mr. Lisle might wait for me till he was gray or till I went out in a hearse. He might drive me then," said Mrs. Middleton cheerfully: "I shouldn't mind."

Sissy laughed: "Well, and I think perhaps I might manage to say 'No' if William were the ambassador. On second thoughts that wouldn't do. No, Mr. Bertie Lisle should come to the window, and look in just as he is looking there, and beckon quietly—you would happen to be facing the other way—and lay his finger on his lips. I should go out as if nothing had happened, and in half a minute you would look out and see me flying down to the little gate, with Bertie Lisle by my side, and the chaise-and-four in the distance. And so adieu, Aunt Harriet!"

She sketched the little scene so vividly, and threw such dramatic fervor into the tone of her farewell, that the old lady started and glanced nervously over her shoulder, as if she expected to see young Lisle on the terrace with his face pressed against the window. "Don't talk such dreadful nonsense, child."

"Nonsense! Is it nonsense? Oh, I think it's just as good sense as a great many things people say and do." And there was another burst of song:

She's o'er the Border, and awa'
Wi' Jock o' Hazeldean.

"O'er the Border: that's it, exactly," said Sissy seriously. "That's just where I want to be."

"What, in Scotland? For that's what it would be, I suppose, as you start on



"FOR PERCIVAL—FOR PERCIVAL!"—Page 68.

the different side," Aunt Harriet replied, conscientiously working it out. "Oh, my dear, you wouldn't like that, I'm sure," with an anxious desire not to leave an invalid's whim unsatisfied, but

to reason it away if it could not be granted. "Scotland at this time of the year! Next summer perhaps."

Sissy stared and laughed: "Scotland! Aunt Harriet, who wants to go to Scot-

land? Pray don't be so fearfully geographical with your Border: you'll be telling me something about the population and productions of Berwick-upon-Tweed next."

"Why, I thought you meant—"

"Then I didn't," said Sissy promptly. "Where *is* the border, I wonder? It seems to me to be all round us, shutting us in like a wall. Didn't you ever feel it? And what is there on the other side? It can't be just the same, surely: no, that would be too dreadful. Oh, Jock o' Hazeldean, where are you? Come quickly, Jock, and take me

O'er the Border, and awa'."

"My dearest Sissy! really—"

"My dear aunt Harriet, there's no harm in wishing to be o'er the Border, is there? And haven't I heard you say, scores of times, that it's very disagreeable to travel without a gentleman? There! don't look so puzzled. I don't suppose Jock will come while I'm in the mood; but *if* he does—*if* he does—" And Sissy went off with a laugh and a swift step which died into silence and a lagging gait as soon as the door had closed behind her.

Surely, we must be rather narrow and monotonous beings (I speak modestly for the Human Race), to judge by the anxiety which our friends display if we show the least tendency to deviate from our ordinary groove. "Ah! I thought So-and-So didn't seem quite like himself," or "herself," as the case might be; and every one looks mysterious or shocked. I dare say they are right. We are bound so closely to this rather wearisome self that it is advisable to make the best of it. We cannot get rid of the Something which is partly what we are now, and partly what other people imagine us, and partly what circumstances force us to be, and partly what we once were and never by any possibility can be again. Sometimes when we are alone with that Something, gazing thoughtfully at it, a gleam of light will fall on it as it turns in its sleep and show a face that is altogether strange. It is cumbered with dead loves, dead friendships,

dead hopes, dead faiths. What is it? "Yourself," they say. Ah no! It is not myself, but I feel that I am bound to it, and it is useless to drag it into follies in a vain attempt to get free. Better to come back and walk in the appointed way; and since we must live together, and its power is great to help or harm, let it be as fair and pure as I can make it.

Mrs. Middleton was greatly troubled and perplexed by Sissy's uneasy bursts of merriment. "She isn't like herself," the old lady thought. "What could she mean by talking in that random way about Jock o' Hazeldean?" It might have passed for mere nonsense but for the certainty that Sissy had been secretly studying Bertie's photograph. "She never can have seen him anywhere and—and fallen in love with him," thought the simple-minded old lady. "Oh no, impossible!" It did not occur to her that *Percival* had brought the photograph to Brackenhill. Nor would she have understood the interest which Sissy might take in seeking beneath the features of Bertie Lisle for the unknown features of the girl she believed to be her rival; for I doubt if she remembered that there was a Miss Lisle at all.

"Dear me! it's very puzzling," she said to herself as she clasped the album and laid it down. "I wish Godfrey Hammond were here, or even Percival. I can't make Sissy out. I wish she would see Dr. Grey, or if she would only try the cod-liver oil it would be something."

Consequently, it was a real pleasure to Aunt Middleton when she saw a neat portmanteau in the hall, and heard that Mr. Percival had met Mr. Thorne just inside the gate, and was walking up. A minute earlier Sissy had stood on the same spot, gazing at the neatly-engraved name, "PERCIVAL THORNE," as if it had a snake-like fascination for her. In a quarter of an hour, she thought, Percival would be there—would stand before her with his dark eyes shining and his hand outstretched, stately and handsome like a king as he was—her king, living and dying. Only a few minutes and she would hear his voice, musical and full, whose tones always conveyed ideas of

leisure and abundant kindliness. And her heart within her was heavy as lead.

"Now it will all come out," she said to herself as she turned away; "and what will Percival do?" Surely he would stand by her. If he would, all else might go to utter wreck and she be unconscious of loss. But if not—

She stood by a window on the stairs and looked out across the park. Everything was gray and still. The year had lost its splendor as of royal robes, and wore the aspect of a dethroned king waiting in apathetic silence till the end should come. There is something very mournful about autumn when its time is nearly spent. It lies stretched in faint gleams of sunshine, as if it dreamed of glory that is gone, clasping some poor remnants of the beauty and verdure of the summer. But it is so despairing that it will make no effort to retain even these. At the first breath of winter it lets its handful of yellow leaves escape, and gives up life with its last flowers. Sissy felt something of this as she looked out and saw two figures coming along the sodden drive. They talked as they came—with unusual earnestness she thought—pausing more than once, while the taller bent his head as if in eager attention. Surely Fate would not be so cruel as to betray her before Percival crossed the threshold, and rob her of the touch of his hand, his smile and word of greeting!

She would have known that she was in no danger from their talk could she have overheard it. Mr. Thorne was eloquent about the iniquities of one of his tenants, and his grandson was feigning an interest he did not feel. As they drew near the long gray house young Thorne looked up and thought, "Sissy will be somewhere about;" and while he said, "I don't see how you could have acted otherwise—half measures don't do with a fellow of that stamp," his eyes wandered over the windows, which glittered feebly in a passing gleam of sunlight. The door opened as they went up the steps, and Aunt Middleton came out to greet them. Percival was hurried into the hall, questioned and made much of, but he looked

round for another greeting, and was suddenly aware that he had been looking forward to it ever since he had thought of coming down to Brackenhill, perhaps even earlier. For the first time in his life he hesitated to ask for Sissy, but after a moment Mr. Thorne looked round: "Why, where's our little girl?—Sissy, here's Percival. Sissy!"

She had but to turn the corner of the stairs, and she stood like a fair vision above them. She did not speak, but her eyes met Percival's, and a sudden rose-color flushed her face. Some people have features which blur and distort the meaning of their souls. Hesitation looks like sullenness, shyness like awkward pride, gratitude like coldness—nay, very Love himself wears so clumsy a guise that he is apt to be scared at his own aspect. But if Sissy's lips and eyes failed exactly to convey her thought, it was because they lent it an added loveliness. As she came down, step by step, she was anxious and perplexed, and these doubtful feelings had for expression a shy and lingering grace in which the painter might have found a picture, the poet a poem. Percival, though neither, found both. Even Mrs. Middleton was struck. "Why, Sissy," she said, "you look like a queen!"

Percival smiled, and while she was yet a couple of steps above him he knelt on one knee on the lowest stair and kissed the little hand which she held out. Tears swam in Sissy's eyes, and there was a lump in her throat. She dared not attempt to speak, but with the other hand she timidly touched his waves of strong short hair.

"Ah! we shall be all right now," said Mr. Thorne to himself with a silent chuckle. "I needn't have feared that any one was fretting for Horace."

The pretty picture lasted but for a moment, and all tongues were loosened as they went into the drawing-room. Sissy sat on the hearth-rug leaning against Aunt Harriet. Whenever she spoke Percival's eyes sought hers with swift attention, and once, while Mrs. Middleton was wandering round an anecdote, he stooped and silently gave her a screen, and both were conscious that their hands

touched. Sissy laughed and talked the quicker for that touch. There was a feverish brightness in her looks and words: it was like the vivid flitting of a butterfly, if a butterfly could be conscious of the frailty of its life and loveliness, and make little distracted dashes here and there, looking airily brilliant all the while.

"Time to go and dress," said Mrs. Middleton at last; and Sissy sprang up and went hastily away.

Mr. Thorne looked at his watch: "Ah! I must speak to Duncan." (Duncan was the butler.) "I think he and I know your taste—don't we, Percival?" and he looked proudly at the grandson who *had* a taste which was worth considering.

"I'll trust you, sir," said the young man with a smile, "as far as it is possible to trust any one in such a matter."

He turned to Mrs. Middleton as soon as they were alone: "So your last news of Horace was better?"

"Rather," she replied; "but I am afraid to build much on one hopeful letter. Still, I am very thankful."

"You said Sissy was ill."

"So she is, though she is wonderfully bright this afternoon. Don't you think she looks ill?"

"Hm! She looks like a perfectly beautiful and delicate flower—as if a touch might destroy her. Yes, perhaps she does look ill, but it is the most bewitching, the most extraordinarily charming, illness that ever was. If it were only catching, I think she would be mobbed."

"I'm afraid in a day or two you won't have any doubt about her," said Mrs. Middleton.

"Ah!" Percival gazed thoughtfully at the fire. Suddenly he lifted his eyes to the old lady's face: "My grandfather doesn't prescribe for her, does he?"

She was horrified at the question: "Good gracious! no. You *don't* suppose I should let him go near her with his nasty poisons?"

"No, I didn't really suppose it. It was only an idea which occurred to me. Sissy looks a little like the stories one reads of people who are under the influence of some powerful drug."

Mr. Thorne was curious in the matter of poisons, and kept a rather dangerous little medicine-chest under lock and key in his own room. If he were ill—which he seldom was—he liked a remedy which had to be accurately measured by drops, and of which an overdose would be fatal. Better still, he liked the handling of little carefully-stoppered phials containing so much death. Horace thought it an idiotic whim for any one to have; Mrs. Middleton shuddered at it; Percival understood it and smiled: "Gives him a sense of power;" which was precisely the fact.

"She sha'n't be under the influence of any of his drugs," said Aunt Harriet. "I spoke to Dr. Grey about her, and he said, 'Try cod-liver oil.'"

"More harmless, no doubt," smiled Percival, "but much more unpleasant."

"She won't take it," said Mrs. Middleton plaintively; "and when I told Godfrey Hammond, he said Dr. Grey was an idiot."

"Ah? I am rather of his opinion. What did *he* recommend for Sissy? I know you swear by him, and he always has something to suggest. What did Hammond tell you to do?"

Aunt Harriet had the words of Mr. Hammond's prescription in her ears, "Ask Percival down," but she could not very well repeat them with Percival's dark glances fixed upon her face. The guileless old lady was confused. A faint color mounted to her wintry cheek, and there was a little sound of nervous laughter in her voice: "Oh, I don't know. He didn't say very much. I think he fancied she would be better if she had a little change and society, perhaps. You see, Sissy is young, and—and—we are not much company for her, Godfrey and I, you know." She was floundering painfully, and knew it. "Is that a needle on the carpet, just by your foot?"

Percival sought for it anxiously, but in vain.

"I can't see it, either, now," said Mrs. Middleton: "the light must have shone on it just where I was standing;" and the deceitful old lady went back to the precise spot on the hearth-rug where she

had been before. "I was just opposite that vase, I know;" and eyed the carpet intently with her head a little on one side. "How very funny! I can't see it now. Don't bother yourself any more, Percival: I really think it can't have been a needle, after all."

"Do you think not?" said Percival, with a slight quiver at the corner of his mouth. "Hadn't we better make sure? They are nasty things to lie about. I remember my nurse used to say so. Suppose I ring for the candles, and we have a hunt?"

"Oh no, I don't think we need. I'm nearly sure it wasn't a needle. Never mind it."

"Are you quite sure?" he persisted. "I'm afraid you are saying it to spare me. Suppose it sticks into your old tabby cat? Let's see if we can't find out the mystery about this needle, Aunt Harriet: my eyes are tolerably sharp."

"A great deal too sharp," she answered quickly: "leave the needle alone."

Percival got up, looked her deliberately in the face, and they both laughed.

"I don't think *you* are looking quite the same as usual," she said, carrying the war into the enemy's country.

"What is the difference?"

"I noticed it while we all sat talking here. You don't look quite so—so contented as you always used."

"I've nothing to make me discontented," he answered in a tone which for him was a little hasty. "I am just the same as ever—rather more contented if anything; at least with rather more cause to be so."

"That may be," she answered; "especially as 'contented' wasn't exactly the word I meant."

"What, then?"

"Well, lazy: you don't look quite so indolent as you did."

"Don't I?" said Percival, who of late had been conscious of faint stirrings of a novel restlessness. "I didn't know I had given proofs of vehement energy since my arrival this afternoon."

"No, I don't think you have. Go this minute and get ready for dinner," said Mrs. Middleton.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRINCIPLES AND PERSONS.

DINNER was over, the wine and fruit were on the table. Sissy was peeling one of those late pears which, though they may be tolerably good when nothing better is to be obtained, are an insult to the melting, juicy fruit which we ate in the golden summer. Solid, durable qualities are all very well in their way—let us be thankful for them, and lay up our winter stores of pears and apples—but oh the banquets of July and August! a moment's enjoyment and then a memory.

Percival sipped his wine with a grave satisfaction which his grandfather was delighted to see. Mrs. Middleton was right: there was a change in our hero. He had awakened to a more practical appreciation of the world and what it held. Having discovered that it was limited, and that his power was limited too, nothing remained but to ascertain what joys were within his reach, to make the most of those, and to close his eyes to impossible visions faint and far away. Percival had begun to think about storing winter fruit. He had substituted a lower aim for an indefinite desire, but in outward appearance he was even more like a girl's hero of romance than he had been. A little more decision and defiance in his glance, a slight shadow under his eyes, making them more sombre than before, a little more readiness of look and speech,—there was no great change.

He broke the silence with a very commonplace remark: "So you have a new—Is he a young footman or an aged page?"

"Oh! you mean George," said Mrs. Middleton. "He is rather young, but I hope he'll do."

"I don't think he will," said Percival.

"Why not? He is a good steady lad, and his mother is a widow and very badly off. I really think I've seen clumsier boys," said the kind old lady, making a strenuous effort to compliment George, and to do it as little at the expense of truth as possible; "and he's at an awkward age too."

"Undoubtedly. I dare say he is a good

honest fellow—in fact, he looks like it; but if ever you make a servant of him—"

"I think he does his best," said Sissy.

"I fear he does: there might be some hope of him if he were doing his worst. I wonder whether you would speak up for him, Sissy, if you knew how very narrowly you escaped a deluge of bread-sauce? I assure you for a moment I was in a perfect agony of apprehension—"

"How very good of you!"

"Lest there should be none left for me. And after that I noticed him a little more. He halts between two opinions, and before doing the slightest thing he tries to work it out in all its possible consequences. Meanwhile, he doesn't wait, and we do."

"He is dreadfully afraid of Duncan," said Mrs. Middleton.

"So I perceived. And to crown all," said Percival, "he is one of those unfortunate people who cannot meditate freely unless their mouths are hanging open. I don't think you'll break him of that, and if you tied it up it might suggest mumps."

"He is awkward," Mrs. Middleton allowed; "but, you see, his mother is such a hard-working woman."

"That is a great merit in George, no doubt. But couldn't you make something else of him?"

Mr. Thorne, who had apparently been lost in thought, woke up: "Would you like to send him to Parliament to support Mr. Gladstone? There's a vacancy at Fordborough just now."

"A vacancy at Fordborough! How so?"

"Old Bridgman died last night of apoplexy: it was telegraphed down this afternoon. Silas Fielding told me."

Percival leant back in his chair and thoughtfully caressed the down on his upper lip. His grandfather watched him out of the corners of his eyes.

"That was sudden. He wasn't an old man at all, was he?" said Mrs. Middleton.

"Only sixty-two; but he always looked like the sort of man who might go off in a fit any day."

"It will be a blow to the Fordborough

Liberals," said Percival. "Bridgman's property in the neighborhood gave him great weight with the half-and-half people. Has he a son?"

"By his second marriage, yes—a boy of ten or twelve."

"Oh! then they must look out for a new man altogether."

"I don't see that they need look very far," said Mr. Thorne.

Percival smiled: "No, I dare say not. Constituencies are like heiresses—apt to be even a little overdone with perfectly disinterested lovers."

The old squire filled his glass to the brim: "What do you think of Mr. Percival Thorne for a candidate? Shall I drink to his success?"

Sensation, as the reporters say, for there was no doubt that Godfrey Thorne was in earnest.

"You wish *me* to stand?" said Percival after a pause.

"Why not?"

"On the Radical side?"

"No: I don't wish that. But the crude, haphazard ideas you call your principles would, I fear, prevent you from standing on any other at present. Besides, there is no opening for a Conservative."

"Hm!" said Percival; "and I suppose I may count on the Brackenhill influence to back me?"

"Undoubtedly you may."

Mrs. Middleton became exceedingly pink: even Percival was startled. He said nothing, but he propped his chin on his hand and gazed thoughtfully at the old man with a whimsical expression of perplexity and expectation.

"What now?" said Mr. Thorne: "do you think I'm going to change into some curious kind of wild animal, that you all sit looking at me in this fashion?"

"Say an ostrich," Percival blandly suggested, "capable of swallowing things one would have imagined must disagree with him. No, I don't *expect* that. I am looking for some further development."

Mr. Thorne enjoyed the situation. "You have only to make up your mind," he said: "if you choose to attempt it, I will find the necessary funds and help you with all the influence I have."

"WHAT!" said Mrs. Middleton. She was crimson.

Her brother looked coolly at her: "Why not?"

"You call yourself a Conservative?"

"Never!" said Godfrey with emphasis. "It's a nasty, slippery word. You think you have got hold of a man underneath it, and he wriggles away, Heaven only knows where. Call yourself a Tory, and I know what you mean. People are Liberal-Conservatives or Conservative-Liberals now-a-days, and no one sees any absurdity in it; but what should you think of a fellow who called himself a Liberal-Tory?"

Mrs. Middleton returned to the charge: "Then you consider yourself a Tory?"

He bowed a smiling little assent, and sipped his wine.

"And yet you tell Percival—when you know he is a Radical, a Red Republican—" The young man arched his brows, and with a swift movement of his hands deprecated the extreme tint; but Mrs. Middleton swept on, heedless of the silent protest: "You tell Percival that he may count on your support. Is that conscientious?"

"Did I say I was conscientious?"

"Perhaps it was as well you did not," his sister retorted. "The Thornes have been Tories for—how many generations, Godfrey? I never expected to hear my brother call himself by the old name and be false to the cause. And let me tell you, Godfrey, I call that—"

"My dear," said the old man with the sweetest courtesy, "in your present state of mind I wouldn't *call* it anything if I were you. But don't let me prevent your thinking it what you please."

"That I most certainly shall," said Aunt Harriet, still much flushed and very warlike of aspect.

"Well," Mr. Thorne conceded, "perhaps it does sound peculiar. But, if you only think a moment, we are all being carried steadily and irresistibly toward democracy."

"So much the worse," snapped Aunt Harriet.

"Granted—so much the worse, but I can't alter it. By my great grandson's

time there'll be nothing left for a Tory to fight for."

She groaned.

"And if my grandson likes to help in pulling down what little there is now, he may. It won't make much difference to the next generation, and I don't care about the next generation. My vote and my interest won't stop the tide. In a few years what influence I have will probably be swamped. It used to be a power, and now it is mere ornament, hollow—a toy weapon which will break if I draw it against the enemy. Let Percival have it to play with if he likes."

"Sissy, is my cap straight?" said Mrs. Middleton in a hurried aside. She was so much discomposed that she felt as if it must be awry, and was but half reassured when Sissy smiled and nodded.

Percival, as he sat opposite,

Played with spoons, explored his plate's design,
And ranged the olive-stones about its edge,

while he revolved the new idea in his mind.

Mr. Thorne turned to him: "Well, what do you say? There's strength enough in Toryism yet to give you a little healthful exercise, I dare say."

"More than that," said Percival.

"You are a clever fellow, no doubt," his grandfather went on, "but you won't have made a clean sweep of everything before I die. After that"—he shrugged his shoulders—"you must do as you please. Some day, perhaps, you will have finished your job, and can sit down and rest in your ideal world, with its whole surface stamped to a dead level of mud. By that time I trust that I shall have long been admitted to the delightful Tory society I shall find above."

"How do you know they'll be Conservative up there, sir?"

"Of course they will," said Mr. Thorne: "it must be evident to any mind not warped by Radical prejudice. The Tories are nearly all dead, and most of them were a great deal better than anybody else. And if a few Radicals should find their way in, they'll turn Conservative as soon as they see they have distanced their fellows."

Mrs. Middleton returned to the charge in a gentler tone: "I dare say what you say may be very true, Godfrey. I do think things are coming to a dreadful pass, what with the uppishness of servants, and the trades unions, and the hats and feathers the girls will wear about here. Very likely you are right."

"My grandfather is exaggerating to an alarming extent," said Percival.

"Exaggerating!" said the old man. "Not a bit of it."

"You despair of your cause too soon, sir."

"Too soon! Am I to put off despairing for fifty years or so? What is the good of shutting my eyes to what will assuredly come? To know that one must despair some day is to despair at once."

"I dare say what you say may be very true, Godfrey," Aunt Harriet began again, "but I don't see that that makes it a bit more right for you to go and help the Radicals when you call yourself a Tory. You will always have to think that it was partly your work if they win—"

"I should say," Mr. Thorne interrupted her with the air of a man who is weighing something very accurately indeed, "that I should have exactly as much to answer for as if I lent the river a helping hand to leap down at Niagara. My conscience, possibly hardened, is equal to that burden, Harriet."

"Then it oughtn't to be. If we are coming to such a horrid state of things—"

"My dear, my dear," in a soothing tone, "you'll be out of it—with me. It's only these poor young people here—"

"You ought to stand by the right to the last. I'm not blaming Percival. I can't think why he has such nasty opinions, but as he has them, it can't be helped." She glanced at the young fellow's face with wonder and a faint shadow of disgust, as if she saw republicanism coming visibly out—very red indeed, like an unpleasant sort of rash. "There's nothing more to be said about it, and I hope he knows that I should like him to get on, and that I wish him well in everything else. But you don't think as he does, thank Goodness! And after all,

Godfrey, your vote wasn't given you for Percival."

"Well done!" said the young man. "Why, Aunt Harriet, you'll make a Woman's Rights champion of me! Astounding fact! Here is a woman who prefers principles to persons in politics! Aunt Harriet, do you know you are very interesting indeed?"

"I know that you are very impertinent," said the old lady with a smile. She was anxious that he should understand that her opposition arose from no ill-will to him, and wanted to atone for any unkindness in her words.

Percival made a small note in his pocket-book. "When hereafter I balance the arguments for and against the extension of the franchise to women, you will score one for it," he said with much solemnity. "You will possibly influence my political career, and should I enter Parliament and supersede Mr. Gladstone, you may seriously affect the course of legislation."

"Very good," said the old lady. "Give me a vote and I'll use it against you. Trust me."

"I do," was the fervent reply.

"And what does Sissy say to it all?" asked Mr. Thorne. "Will you vote for Percival, Sissy, and send him to Parliament to undermine Church and State and trample down everything? He will be Citizen Thorne, and George the footman will be Citizen Something-else, and you'll all be free and equal—eh, Sissy?"

She flashed a swift shy glance at Percival. "I'll tell you what I'll do with my vote," she said, "when I get it."

She was not much alarmed. She thought Mr. Thorne's little sketch of the future sounded very disagreeable, but if Percival wanted people to be citizens, no doubt it was all right. A girl who is in love, and still in her teens, cannot be greatly disturbed by any schemes of universal equality. You may say what you please, and so may she, but in her heart she is perfectly convinced that it is beyond the power of mortals to reduce her hero to the ordinary level of mankind.

Aunt Harriet had rather distinguished herself that evening, and had made

more impression on her brother than she at all supposed. Now she proceeded to add her final argument, as a child adds one more brick to a frail wooden tower, and of course she brought the whole structure down with a crash: "And there's something else to be thought of, Godfrey. What will all your neighbors think? I couldn't bear to hear them say you had turned traitor, when the Thornes have never failed them yet. Why, what did our grandfather spend on that great election when he vowed he would have the seat if it cost him Brackenhill? Oh, Godfrey, what would Mr. Falconer say, or Mr. Garnett?"

"That's to be thought of, is it?" said Mr. Thorne. "No doubt you are right. Messrs. Garnett and Falconer and the

rest of them consider me ticketed and shelved, and look upon my vote as theirs. Well, I think it is about time that they should learn that it is mine."

"Oh, Godfrey! you know I didn't mean it so," said Mrs. Middleton.

He smiled: "There's nothing more to be said. I have pledged my word, and the decision rests with Percival."

Aunt Harriet perceived her fatal mistake, and had tact enough not to make it worse by further words. The moment she found herself in the drawing-room with Sissy she hurried to one of the old-fashioned mirrors: "My dear Sissy, are you sure my cap is straight? I don't think it *can* be, I feel so dreadfully awry."



CHAPTER XVII.

A MIDNIGHT ENCOUNTER.



PERCIVAL," said Sissy, as later in the evening he joined her at the piano, "have you made up your mind yet?"

"Not just now. I feel a curious reluctance to say No, and yet—"

"What?"

He hesitated: "Well, I am not sure that my po-

litical creed is definite enough for action. And I see other difficulties in the way. It is Horace, and not I, who should stand for Fordborough."

"Always Horace first."

"Well, he will live at Brackenhill—at least, I hope so. Probably in a few years' time I shall have no connection whatever with the neighborhood."

"Don't talk like that: it sounds very horrid," said Sissy. "Horace knows nothing of politics."

"Not much," Percival smiled. "Less than I do, though I can't think how he contrives it. But what then? He is a Conservative, and, unlike my grandfather, a Conservative of a fighting type."

"Why aren't you a Conservative too?" said Sissy. "They were talking nonsense, weren't they? You don't want to be Citizen Thorne, do you? Not really?"

Percival disclaimed any aspirations of the kind. "I'm not much of a Radical," he said. "I think I'm too idle."

"I can't make up my mind whether

I want you to stand or not," said Sissy thoughtfully. "M. P. certainly sounds very nice, but I should have to wear a yellow dress, and read the debates to see when you said anything; and yellow isn't my color, I am afraid—"

"And the debates aren't your style of reading, I know. But, Sissy, you are a Tory: you mustn't wear my colors."

"Oh yes, I should. I should be a Radical just for once, by way of a change. Uncle Thorne would want some one to keep him in countenance."

"How noble of you! I imagine the pair of you gallantly confronting the sorrowful and disgusted county. What a help you will be to him!"

"Percival, don't laugh at me. Do you hear, sir?"

"Laugh! why, I am perfectly serious. Of course you will be a help. On a hot day, when people fly in the face of Nature and insist on the energetic pursuit of a purpose, I can't tell you what a support the butterflies are to me."

"And I am a butterfly?" said Sissy. She was playing little tinkling notes with her right hand, as her manner was when any one talked to her at the piano.

"Please," said the tall young man at her side. "Everything and everybody will soon be too self-conscious and analytical for any heedless happiness to be left in the world at all. We are so prudent and anxious we can't so much as revel in fruit or drink new milk without a reminder that we ought to be careful to preserve the one and condense the other, and put them into air-tight tins, so that we may have a spoonful or so all the year round, instead of a reckless, happy feast to-day. Soon everything will be in tins—good, commonplace and economical. Be a butterfly, Sissy. Don't be like hardworking, dingy little ants and things, making nasty little holes and houses all through June, because their lives are nothing but a foreboding of November. Be a butterfly, Sissy."

"Yes," said Sissy simply. "But it would be dreadful to be always expected to skim about and be gay if one happened to be tired or hurt."

"And if one attempted to help the poor thing, one would brush all the bloom off its wings," said Percival. "But, Sissy, this train of thought isn't right for a butterfly, at least not yet. I have an idea that the Butterfly of the Future will count martyrdom in the cause of knowledge an enviable fate, and will fly to the collectors to secure the immortality of having a pin stuck through it and being classified in a camphor-scented drawer." He looked at his watch: "Why, go to bed, Sissy: it is eleven o'clock, and you look pale. Dream of a yellow dress."

"A brimstone butterfly: what would Aunt Harriet say?" And Sissy went off.

Percival rested his elbow on the piano. With his dark brows and compressed lips he appeared lost in thought, but in reality the letters M. P. floated before his eyes, and he wavered idly between Shall I? and Shall I not? His grandfather paced to and fro in the dim end of the room, and Aunt Harriet was busy over an account-book. If anything vexed or worried her she generally flew to her accounts. I imagine she felt that a long column of her undecided figures fully justified any amount of irritation in which it might otherwise be sinful to indulge. She glanced at Percival now and then, and once she fell into deep meditation, drawing hieroglyphics on her blotting-paper till the fine point of her pen acquired a hairy knob, which disconcerted her very much when she recommenced work. Her impatient exclamation roused her brother from his reverie.

"Bedtime," he said, and bade her good-night as he passed.—"Are you considering what you will say to the Fordborough voters, Percival?"

"I haven't decided whether I will face them yet."

"Try it—try it," said the old man. "I'm not far from eighty, you know. If you don't make a beginning of your career soon, I sha'n't live to see it."

"My career!" said Percival with a

hopeless scorn which might have suited the elder man of the two.

"We must see about your address," the other went on; "and the sooner the better."

"I can't write it to-night, if you mean that," said Percival. "I'm apt to feel much too happy and well satisfied for that kind of thing in the evening. I might compose it in bits, during odd moments of waiting for dinner, perhaps."

"I wish Hammond were here," mused Mr. Thorne: "he might help us to get it into shape. I don't understand these Fordborough electors myself." His glance as he spoke might have fully explained the meaning of the word *canaille* to any one who was ignorant of it. "They want something rather strongly seasoned, I suppose."

"Do you think Hammond understands them better?"

"Yes. He is one generation nearer these new ideas, even if he hates them; and he is very practical. I think I must take in the *Telegraph*. Isn't that the sort of paper to give one ideas?"

"My ideas, no doubt you mean?" said Percival loftily.

"Not at all, but the ideas of your probable supporters. Possibly you imagined they would be identical?" said the old man, with the glance half scornful, half envying, with which generous illusions are often greeted.

"Hm! Perhaps I did. Well, to-morrow will be time enough to decide. I'll think it over to-night."

"Do so. But remember that there is no time to lose. And if you do not make the attempt now, some one else may come in who will not easily be got rid of."

"Oh, I understand that it is now or never," said Percival. "I am going to take that for granted."

Mr. Thorne was moving off, but he paused: "Now or never? No, I don't say that. You may have another opportunity: still, don't throw this one away;" and he went.

"I suppose he means if—if anything happens to poor Horace," thought Percival. "But I'm not going to count on that."

("If anything happens," we say. As if death were a strange and doubtful chance!)

Aunt Harriet wiped her pen and looked anxiously at the musing figure seated by Sissy's piano. There was such silence for the next few minutes that the clock on the chimney-piece seemed to tick louder on purpose to break it. Aunt Harriet's thoughts, and Percival's too, set themselves to its monotonous accompaniment: "Shall I? shall I not?—Shall I? shall I not?" At last she resolved, "I will."—"Sit down," she said when Percival rose to bid her good-night as she crossed the room toward him: "I want to speak to you."

"Say on."

"But sit down. Why are you so ridiculously tall?"

Percival sat down, and the little old lady, in her gray satin gown and point lace, stood over him. "See here," she said: "you must do what you please about this election (I'm sure I wish old Bridgman hadn't died, but he has been aggravating me in every possible way all his life; so this is only a proper ending to it), but you sha'n't make up your mind without considering what it will cost Godfrey."

"Elections are cheaper than they used to be," said Percival dryly.

"They need be, seeing the sort we elect," the old lady retorted. "But I wasn't thinking only of the money. How do you suppose he will feel when all the county families turn their backs on him?"

"Ten years younger and a great deal happier. Why, Aunt Harriet, don't you know that to oppose every one and startle every one is absolute life to my grandfather?"

"Very pleasant for Sissy and myself, that. And for Horace too. Take your own way, Percival, but remember what all his old friends will say."

"Let them say."

"They will declare that you are taking advantage of an old man's childishness to use him for your own advancement."

"My grandfather childish!"

"They are sure to say it. They say

now that you turn him round your finger. And indeed, Percival, I question very much if he would have done this twenty years ago. But you must decide. I only ask you to consider him a little."

"Well, Aunt Harriet," said Percival, "I make no promise, but I will tell you this: It is not likely that I shall accept his offer: every reason I can think of is against it. There is nothing on the other side except a fancy, a reluctance to say 'No,' for which I can't at all account."

Mrs. Middleton eyed him with her head on one side: "I almost think I would rather it were the other way. Well, good-night, Percival."

As soon as she was gone he drew an arm-chair to the centre of the hearth-rug, threw a couple of logs on the fire and settled himself for a comfortable meditation. The old butler, who had been yawning outside, looked despairingly in, feigned astonishment at the sight of him, and was about to retreat.

"Go to bed, Duncan," said Percival. "Don't let any one sit up for me. I am going to be—busy for a little while. I'll see that all is safe. Good-night." And he sank luxuriously back and stretched himself before the leaping blaze as the old man went out.

He was perplexed. Being just at that time so conscious of the limitations of his life, he was strongly drawn to this opening with its novel possibilities. It was unforeseen, and that was in itself a charm. If he refused, what would be left to him? On the other hand, if he accepted he would be injuring his grandfather and Horace. And for what? For his own amusement, for he could hardly say that it was for the sake of political views which he had never been able to define.

He was a sort of Radical from conviction, but his feelings and tastes were Conservative. One day, when he was nothing at all, it had occurred to him, *à propos* of something or other, that the circumstances into which a man was born could hardly be reckoned as a merit of his own. It was not a very startling discovery. Few of us would be inclined to deny the assertion, I suppose, but it does not particularly affect most people. It

seemed, however, to take possession of Percival, and, meditating on it, he was led into strange paths which he would not have chosen, but whence he saw no possible escape. He was not altogether pleased with his political creed, feeling a little as if it had him in a string and were leading him about.

Horace, his grandfather—they were to be considered, but that was not all. Percival felt that he ought to take a lofty and general view of the question. He attempted it, but he hardly seemed to grasp it somehow, and it still remained misty. Possibly, he thought, he had not placed himself at a sufficient distance from it to judge impartially. He laid his head comfortably back, gazed at the ceiling with its shadows and ruddy lights, ever varying yet the same, and endeavored to abstract his mind from the every-day surroundings of his life in order to concentrate his power of thought on the simple question, "Have I a working political creed?" During a few moments of intense thought—it might be a little hazy, but he was dimly conscious that it was almost sublime—he went rather further in the process of self-abstraction than he originally intended. Gliding past such formalities as an election, probably contested, and the declaration of the poll, he found himself member for Fordborough. Nor was this all. He had gained the ear of the House, he had got rid of all his perplexities, he was making a great speech. The words poured from his lips amid breathless attention. The strangest fact was that the fluent speaker had not the least idea of the subject of his eloquence, or even of the end of the sentence which he had begun. Good Heavens! he did not so much as know the next syllable! Where did it all come from? And if it stopped suddenly! . . . It *did* stop suddenly. He groped wildly for a word, turning very cold, and found himself sitting bolt upright, staring into the dark.

It was not utterly dark, for he soon perceived a dull red spot before him, the glimmering embers of that joyous blaze. He found an old letter in his pocket, twisted up the cover and thrust it into

the wood-ashes. At first it smouldered doubtfully: he stooped down and blew it gently, and it burst into a flame. The light played for a moment on the shining watch and the intent face above it, and then went out. But he had learned all he wanted to know: it was five-and-twenty minutes to three. The little sparks ran hurriedly to and fro in the rustling black paper, and died as they ran. The last went out, and Percival stood up in the darkness and stretched himself.

Five-and-twenty minutes to three! Not a very dreadful fact in itself, but terrible in a house like Brackenhill, where every one was asleep by midnight, and to be up late was supposed to partake of the nature of sin. Such houses seem to take their character from their occupants. The doors creak in horror when you open them cautiously; the boards on which you set your feet are in league to betray you, the dismay with which you start from one arousing the next; while every echo is miraculously awake. Percival groped his way to the hall-table, where he knew that a candle and matches would be ready for him. He found the box without any trouble, but the match he tried, after scratching noisily and uselessly over the sand-paper more than once, exploded suddenly with a report like a pistol (at least so he afterward affirmed), and then went out before he could find his candlestick. A second attempt succeeded better, though it was followed by the discovery that they had supplied him with a candle whose illuminating power was at least equal to that of magnesium wire. It seemed impossible that it should not flood every nook and cranny with a dazzling glare and awake the entire household. Shading the terrible luminary as well as he could with his hand, the young man started on his perilous journey up the shallow steps of darkly-polished oak, and as he went he weighed the chances of detection.

He would not have far to go when he reached the head of the stairs. A few steps to the right would take him to the passage at the entrance to which was his room. Sissy's was a couple of doors

farther down. "I hope I sha'n't frighten the poor child," thought Percival, "but the way in which this staircase creaks is really an interesting phenomenon, if she could only appreciate it." Aunt Harriet's room was a little farther still on the opposite side. The old lady slept very soundly indeed, and had little fear of robbers, the idea of fire absorbing all her stock of terror. "I shall do very well as far as she is concerned," thought Percival, "unless she happens to take this confounded creaking for the crackling of flames. Good Heavens! what is that?"

He paused on the landing, and the slight but distinct rustling which had startled him paused too. It was in the passage he was about to enter.

His pulses quickened as he stood listening intently and screening the light. He was no coward, but he felt himself in an awkward position. Some one was just round the corner, but who was it? Mr. Thorne and his man Turner slept quite at the other end of the house, and the servants' rooms were all on the next floor. He did not think that either Sissy or Aunt Middleton would be likely to play hide-and-seek in this alarming fashion in the middle of the night. It might be a burglar making ready to spring upon him; and it cannot be denied that it is unpleasant to stand in watchful suspense which may at any moment end in a life-and-death struggle with an armed antagonist. Percival felt all at once that he was breathing hard as he stared at the spot where his foe might suddenly appear. Then a cold shudder ran through him from head to heel: "Where does Hannah Davis sleep, I wonder?"

Hannah was Mrs. Middleton's maid, faithful but hysterical. If by any chance it were she, Percival's appearance would be greeted with a series of wild screams. "I'd rather it were a burglar," he thought: "any one but Hannah."

It was really not a minute from his first alarm when a face peered round the corner. Sissy stood there wrapped in a white dressing-gown. Pale as death and with dilated eyes, she held up her hand in sign of silence. A step, and

Percival was at her side: "Sissy, in Heaven's name, what is amiss?"

She clung with trembling hands to his arm before she answered: "There's a man, a robber— Oh, Percival!"

Percival looked hastily round, as if he expected to be introduced to the man then and there. Seeing nobody, "Where?" said he.

She pointed vaguely down the passage. "I was lying awake," she explained in a gasping whisper, "and not five minutes ago some one came stealing along in the dark. He didn't know his way, I think, for he drew his hand along the wall as he went, and touched the fastening of my door. Oh, Percival! But he went on, and when I heard him turn to the left I hurried out and ran to your door to wake you, but it was open, and I said, 'Percival,' and you didn't speak. And then I heard some one coming up stairs, and I thought it was another of them, and I tried to scream, but I couldn't. And all at once I knew it was you, and I looked round. And if it hadn't been, I should have gone mad that moment."

"My poor child!" said Thorne tenderly. Sissy had ended her speech on the threshold of his room, and as he spoke he had a pistol in his hand. She followed him mutely to her own door. "Wait here for me," he said. "I dare say there may be nothing wrong. Don't be frightened. Stay: perhaps you might as well turn the key in the lock till I come."

The trembling little girl of a moment before flashed a steady, scornful look at him: "No, no."

He was turning to go. His olive cheek was a shade paler than usual, his lips were firmly set, his eyes shining with a fierce excitement which was almost pleasure. Men have so few opportunities now of satisfying their warlike instincts and rejoicing in their strength, compared with the opportunities of the old days.

"Take care! oh, Percival, take care!"

The agony in her tone was not to be mistaken. For all answer he stooped and kissed her lips. As he lifted his head he heard the sound of footsteps groping along a distant passage. With one quick glance he was gone.

She stood where he left her, sick with a double terror. Fear of the unknown enemy was mixed up with fear of the very weapon which Percival carried, for she was aware of the deadly accuracy with which firearms are wont to point themselves at their possessors. She listened in a strained agony of expectation for a report, a heavy fall and the sudden clamor of the awakened house, but nothing came. For a moment she fancied there was a slight confusion of hurrying steps, but then, listen as she would, all was still. She did not pray, but it seemed to her that she *was* a prayer—for Percival.

Hark! a footfall in the long passage, cautious and light, but coming swiftly toward her. Ah! thank God! It was he, and all was well.

He was laughing when he came round the corner, but he was angry too. If your courage and excitement are at boiling-point, it is all very well to start off on a perilous quest at three o'clock on a November morning. But if the adventure suddenly collapses to absurd dimensions, a little anger is not only natural enough, but needful to enable you to resist the universal chill. Percival would hardly have laughed if he had not been angry. She looked her questions. "It was that idiotic young footman of yours—George," said Thorne in a whisper.

"What! does he walk in his sleep?"

"Not he. Shouldn't mind that so much if he would be kind enough not to walk in yours. The idiot was going to fasten the landing window just over the porch."

Sissy stared in silent amazement.

"Duncan told him to do it in the afternoon. As he was going he was called away for something else, and never went. Just at dinner-time Duncan asked if it were done. The coward said 'Yes,' meaning to go directly he was free, but forgot it till, about half an hour ago, he woke and it flashed upon him. Instantly he imagined a stream of burglars pouring steadily in at the undefended spot. Even if none came, Duncan might discover his negligence to-morrow, and— He shook so," said Percival, "that we were not able to pursue

that branch of the subject. So he got up and started off to see after it."

"But is that true?" questioned Sissy. "Because, you know, this wouldn't be the proper way."

"The proper way led him past Duncan's door. Better wander all over the house than pass that."

"And was it unfastened?"

"The window? Yes. It's fastened now, and the poor wretch has gone back half dead with fright. He certainly thought his last hour had come."

"Poor fellow!" said Sissy. "What did you do to him?"

"Well," said Percival with a leisurely smile, "if you must know, I remembered your poor little white face and—swore at him. Since when I have been thinking what a blessing it is I don't swear as a rule. If I were in the habit of saying—but there is no need for illustrations, perhaps—every time I opened my lips, I should never have thought twice about it, while now I have quite an invigorating feeling of having *done* something—adopted a resolute line of action, you know. And I think George feels so too."

"Is swearing as nice as that? I think I must take to it," Sissy whispered. "I want some excitement sometimes—oh, dreadfully!"

Percival was thinking how wonderful her hair was, all hanging loose, the color of a newly-ripened chestnut at the curling tips, and with here and there a strand of living gold. He laughed and said, "You don't want any more excitement to-night: you've had too much already. I'll teach you to swear to-morrow if you like. Go back to bed now."

"I suppose I must," was her reluctant reply. "I feel as if I would rather not go to sleep any more."

He glanced over his shoulder: "I expect every minute that Aunt Harriet or my grandfather will be getting up a burglar-hunt in their turn, and we shall have to be the burglars."

She hesitated. Percival stood looking at her. He knew she was beautiful: he had seen it many a time—that very afternoon when she came down the stairs, for instance. But he had never felt before

as if something in Sissy's beauty appealed to something in him which thrilled in swift response. He could hardly keep his eyes from betraying the admiration which would have been an insult at that time and place, and he studiously controlled his voice as he reiterated his command, "Go back now, Sissy—go."

"Percival, don't laugh at me. If that window was open some one might have got in."

"Some one *might*, certainly."

"And he may be lurking about somewhere now."

"He *may*, but it isn't likely."

Sissy hung her head: "I'm very stupid, but I don't think I could quite stand another fright to-night."

"It would be too much to expect," said Thorne. "You've behaved like a heroine." A gleam of pleasure crossed the drooping face. "But there's no occasion for any more heroic qualities just now. I am not going to bed 'till daylight doth appear'—at any rate, not till the maids set to work with their scrubbing-brushes and brooms: that's the first indication of dawn in November, isn't it? So, if you can't rest in peace, I shall be compelled to suppose you don't think me able to take care of you."

"Oh, but don't sit up just because I'm foolish."

He smiled. She knew very well that the smile expressed a resolution it was beyond her power to shake. "Shall you sleep, Sissy?"

"So well!" And she crept back to her little white nest. She *did* sleep. An overpowering necessity was upon her, since every waking moment implied a doubt of Percival.

And he went away to commence his watch. He felt something like a true knight keeping his vigil, only the knight-hood had come before, at the touch of Sissy's lips. He thought more of that hurried kiss than she had yet done. Terror first, and then her anxiety lest his watchfulness should be in vain, kept her from looking back, till remembrance flashed upon her with the first gleam of morning and brought the hot color to her face. But Percy recalled it as he sat that

night in his room. Why had he done it? He could not tell. The impulse had been too swift for even a glimpse of its cause. What did it matter? It was done.

It was not a slight thing in Percival's thoughts. His destiny had been swaying in the balance, needing just a little more in one scale or the other to determine it. He had felt as if the decision required an effort he was too indolent to make, and he rejoiced that his momentary impulse had settled it without a thought. For if Sissy's lips had spoken for an hour, they could not have told him as much as that swift midnight touch had done, and the betrayal of her love had been the revelation of his own.

Horace had kissed her many a time from her childhood onward. Master Horace was not chary of his kisses: he had an idea that, as he had no sister, other girls were bound to make good the deficiency. But to Percival's composed lips and sombre eyes nothing slighter than passionate kisses of eternal rapture or farewell—a life's devotion comprehended in a glance—would have seemed appropriate. He was hardly prepared to act up to this exalted ideal perhaps, but instinct told him that it was not for him to traffic in the small change of lovemaking. The touch of his lips was a pledge, and he had given it that November night. It was well. It seemed that he was not capable of a great passion which could enable him to scale the world, to stand with the woman he loved above it all, and look down to see it spinning at his feet. There had been brief moments when such a thing had seemed possible—moments of moonlight madness, when, if he banished Sleep, he could not free himself from her host of circling dreams. But they had vanished now, and given place to a final wakefulness of soul in which he judged himself incapable of any stronger love than that which he felt for Sissy. At the thought of her his heart leapt up in protecting tenderness and the grave lips curved in an involuntary smile. "As pure and sweet as a flower," he thought; "and—God help her!—as delicate."

Percival recognized the fact that at

four o'clock in the morning it would not do to begin singing

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve,

though nothing would have expressed his feelings better. There would have been a happy smiling stress on the "If," which, even while emphasizing the word, would have rendered it almost unnecessary. As he could not sing it, he murmured it under his breath, glowing with a defiant consciousness of power at the second line. He had no misgivings. As he guarded his lady through that dreary night he royally decreed that a blaze of sunshine should light her path henceforward. He would spend himself for his darling little Sissy: in very truth he would die ere she should grieve, though he smiled to think that his death would be the one unconquerable grief. His knowledge had been gained from Sissy's eyes that night.

Where now was the man who had declared that, being a drone with but a scanty income, he could ask no girl richer than himself to share his life? Leaning idly back in his arm-chair, secure of winning Sissy with her eight hundred a year, where was that old resolution uttered so earnestly in a bygone June? Or where were those soft June shadows this black November night?

After all, the change in his sentiments was more apparent than real. He had meant, "I could not go an empty-handed idler to Judith Lisle;" and that was true in November as in June. But he had dressed up his intensely personal idea as a general principle, to make it more fit for society, not meaning to deceive any one, but mechanically, as he would have put on his dress-coat for a dinner-party. It was not a general principle, however: it did not apply to Sissy. If he were a drone, she was the idlest of butterflies, and he felt no shame that the share of gold which chance had allotted to him was somewhat less than hers. Perhaps it would not be smaller in the end, for Percival, who had shrunk from making the least claim on his grandfather, lest it should be acknowledged and met by a counter-claim which might

abridge his liberty, was thinking, as he sat sketching Sissy's future and his own, that after all he had rights.

A housemaid, yawning loudly and sounding very slipshod as she came down the passage, stumbled over his boots outside the door, and recovered herself and her candlestick with a clatter.

"Aurora!" thought Percival. "Rosy-fingered with chilblains, no doubt, and come to end my vigil."

Ten minutes later he was fast asleep, and, with the strange perversity of dreams, neither Sissy Langton nor Judith Lisle passed through his visions that night. Instead of them came Lottie Blake, her wide clear eyes fixed on him, her brier-scratched hand held out in greeting, and the red cap flung on the blackness of her hair.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LOVE IN A MIST.

IF it were possible for us to look into the future, there would be, I imagine, a considerable increase of rather bitter humor in our lives and a considerable falling off in sentiment. We should suddenly grow very old while yet young and vigorous, and should be left without that tenderness for our vanished youth which naturally belongs to old age.

Percival, as he dressed, was thinking of Horace, of Brackenhill, of Sissy, of Parliament. Should he stand for Fordborough or not? He debated the question, all unconscious of the ironical smile worn by the veiled future standing very close at hand. Will you be M. P. for Fordborough? Consider it well, Percival. Twelve months hence you may, with equal benefit to yourself and your friends, consider whether you will be the Man in the Moon.

No: he thought not. He was indolent to the core, and the contest would be a weariness to him. But he would not say so. He was too conscious of his indolence to use the languid manner so much in vogue. Still, he thought not. He was fastidious, and it occurred to him that the Fordborough roughs would probably

throw things at him and call him by some coarse and foolish nickname. Again a motive not to be avowed. Who could own that his political career was cut short by the fear of a rotten egg? Finally, he thought of a certain Fordborough tradesman who must be canvassed, a stout and unctuous grocer, who professed to hold very advanced views, and who would rejoice—Percival instinctively felt how offensively the man would rejoice—over the conversion of the Tory squire of Brackenhill. "I don't know how my grandfather would stand it," he mused: "I believe I should pledge myself to ultra-Conservatism on the spot. I can't do it." But even here was no motive which could be put forward to represent the rest. How could he say, "I will not stand in the Liberal interest because Mr. Simpkin would be pleased"? Yet add to these three reasons the fact that Sissy was making his level life ripple very pleasantly with excitement and speculation, so that he had no need to look elsewhere for interest, and you will have the causes, as far as he could make them out, which led to Percival's decision. And I do not suppose that he was the first who has been bothered by having a host of small motives when all he wanted was one that was big enough to be acknowledged.

I do not intend to conceal any folly of Percival's. When he had dressed he stood and looked at himself in the glass with interest and a little pardonable vanity. The mirror gave him back the portrait of a fine young fellow with a dark, intense face. People did not consider him as handsome as Horace. He knew in his own heart that he was not as handsome. Some might look at Horace who would never look at him, but whoever really looked at him would look again. He smiled and went down stairs, singing to himself, "If she love me, this believe—" Duncan was in the hall scolding George. The butler paused when he heard approaching footsteps, and the poor victim stole an anxious glance at young Mr. Thorne, who went by with his head high, looking so prosperous and unconcerned. Percival kept a strictly neutral expression on his face. "I'm

not going to forgive the idiot for frightening Sissy half out of her wits," he thought. "At the same time, if she wants the poor wretch spared—" and he opened the door of the breakfast-room and went into the pleasant glow of warmth and the fragrance of coffee. Sissy greeted him with a heightened color and averted eyes. Aunt Harriet was not happy till he was established at her elbow in a convenient place for petting. The dear old lady was still half afraid that he might have thought her unkind the night before.

Percival ate and drank, looked up and laughed. "Aunt Harriet," he said, "tell me how you remember people you have met. I think of their height, features, voice and walk, but I fancy you think of them something in this fashion: Mr. Smith—tea very sweet—great weakness for red mullet—thinks all fruit unwholesome with the exception of peaches. Or Miss Jones—likes muffins—detests curry—remarkably fond of raspberry cream. Isn't it so?"

Mrs. Middleton smiled: "Oh, I generally remember what people say they like."

"Pardon me," said Percival decidedly, "but it isn't that. That is nothing, worse than nothing—sometimes it is sickening. I was in a house once where, being very hungry, I praised some minced veal which they gave me. The next day there was a further supply of minced veal, merely as an ornamental companion to an unpleasant dish which they thought delicious. I had no alternative. Instantly it was decided that there was nothing I should like so well at all times as a dish of minced veal. They rush and kill the fatted calf for me the moment they hear of my coming, as if I were the Prodigal Son, not reflecting that even he didn't have to eat the entire animal minced. Besides, he had the advantage of me, for he was half starved. I feel their kindness, I love them for it, and I shall never cross their threshold again unless there should be an unparalleled outbreak of rinderpest."

"I should think not," said Aunt Harriet: "I could tell better than that."

"Of course you could," he smiled: "yours is not knowledge, it is sympathy. Some fine tact tells you *when* one likes a thing. You can distinguish between a moment's whim and a lasting passion."

Mrs. Middleton poured some milk into a saucer for her favorite cat: "Ah! if I could only judge like that in other things, what a wise woman I should be!"

"And how we should all hate you!" said Percival. "No, no: let us believe every whim eternal, since we must needs swear that it is so."

The door opened, and Mr. Thorne came in with his hands full of newspapers. He could scarcely find time to greet Mrs. Middleton and Sissy, he was so eager to show his grandson what was said of old Bridgman and the probable future of Fordborough. But the young man hardly glanced at the paragraphs. "I must have a word with you, sir," he said.

"Yes?" the squire questioned. "Well, that's right. To tell you the truth, Percival, I've wanted a word with you for some time. We must settle things a little."

The younger Thorne, looking up, caught a glance from Sissy's dilated eyes. It brought to his memory the frightened look which George the footman fixed on him as he passed through the hall. He could not help it. The scared expression was the same in both, but he was angry with himself that anything in Sissy's beautiful face should remind him of that lout. And why was she ill at ease? It should not be for long:

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve.

He followed his grandfather to the library. The old man sat down, but Percival chose to stand, with his elbow on the chimney-piece and his eyes fixed on the restless little flames which licked a half-burnt log. "I've made up my mind not to try for the Fordborough seat," he said.

"Eh? Why not?" Mr. Thorne had lain awake a great part of the night foreseeing wounds to his pride and half inclined to regret the offer he had made. But when Percival quietly put it aside he

was disappointed. "What are your reasons?" he reiterated.

"Such small ones that the real reason must be that I don't take a deep interest in political questions," Percival replied. "They would be as dust in the balance if there were any weight in the opposite scale. There is none, and they have turned it."

"I'm sorry," said the other curtly.

His grandson turned and looked curiously at him: "Why, you cannot really *wish* for a Radical at Fordborough. And if it's only on my account—"

"I'm sorry," Godfrey Thorne repeated. "I think I hoped that you would settle down, give up your wandering life, have an ambition and look forward a little. But it seems it is not to be."

"I needn't contest a borough for that, surely," said the young man with a smile.

"If I could only see you married!" his grandfather went on. "You are the last of us all, Percival: do you ever think of that? In the natural course of things you will outlive poor Horace—and then?"

"Horace will come back strong and well, I hope, and live to have sons of his own," said Percival. He spoke the more energetically that he felt a sudden assurance that what his grandfather said was true, and that he would be the last of the Thornes and the final heir of the beautiful old manor-house, which year by year he was learning to love.

"Horace have sons? Poor sickly things like their father and his father!" Godfrey answered bitterly—"nipped and dying off like plants in an east wind. No, no, Percival: I must be very hopeful or very despairing when I take to building on that."

The young man was saying to himself, "Since I have decided, better seal my decision." So he replied, "You build on me, then? Very good. But whether I marry or not doesn't depend on me."

Mr. Thorne was on his feet in a moment, stammering in his eagerness: "What? what? on me, then? Is it money you are thinking of, Percival?"

The younger Thorne remained as before, with his head a little bent.

"Mine's only a bachelor's income, I

suppose," he said. "And yet it doesn't depend on you. I'm going to ask Sissy if she'll have me. If she will, I might lose my last penny, and it would only make her cling to me the more. And if she won't, why, all Brackenhill in my hand wouldn't help me."

He was so careful not to betray the easy confidence which filled his heart that his last words had quite a despondent ring in them, and the squire was very much alarmed. However, he declared what he would do for the young couple: "I'll make it all right on the wedding-day: you shall have as much as Sissy, or more if you want it. And afterward— You must wait till the old man dies, Percival—not very long now, not very long. Must hold the reins to the last. But then I think you'll be satisfied. I *think* so."

"I don't think I want so much that I am very hard to satisfy," said his grandson.

"That you are not. I wish you were harder sometimes: I want you to ask and have. Horace can ask fast enough when he wants anything, and Sissy can come smiling and coaxing for her pretty little whims; but never you, my boy, never once."

"And never will," said the young fellow to himself. He was touched by the sorrowful longing of the old squire's tone, but he set his face like a flint and steeled his heart against it. "I should be scorned as soon as won," thought he. So far as he must sacrifice his independence for Sissy's sake, he would do it, but he would ask for nothing, and he was resolved to take nothing, but what was offered unconditionally.

"You're too proud to give the old man the little bit of pleasure he wants—just the thought that you can't get on without him, that you count on him, and come to him in any need. When you first set foot in my house, a solemn boy, weighing out your words and looking watchfully about you, I said, 'Ah well! wait a while. He doesn't know his old home and his old grandfather yet: he'll thaw soon.' But you never have. You stand aloof and hold me at arm's length.

I was hard on your father, it's true; but, after all, he wouldn't have had Brackenhill, would he? You'll outlive me. I've wronged you, no doubt, but I'll do all I can—more than you think, perhaps—to make amends. Can't you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive," said Percival loftily. "All that my father lost was well lost for my mother's sake. It was a fair bargain, he to go his way, and you yours. Neither he nor I complain of it, as he would tell you were he living now. I make no claim, sir, and I never will."

"But you will not refuse to take what I give you?" the other entreated.

Percival's mind was made up, yet he hesitated. His independence seemed slipping through his fingers, and, like most things, was dearest at the moment of loss. "No, I won't refuse," he said at last. "Yet stay. On what conditions do you offer it?"

"None. You shall be as free as before."

Percival shook his head: "Impossible!"

"But you shall. It shall be yours absolutely: you shall do what you please with it."

"And suppose I do anything which displeases you—" Percival began.

"You will not displease me," said the squire. "And nothing shall make any difference."

"It must make a difference," murmured Percival.

"Upon my word," Mr. Thorne exclaimed, "you're the hardest man to deal with I ever came across. Tell me what *would* please you, if you will be so kind. Anything that comes from dead-and-gone Percivals, I suppose, and nothing that comes from me. Say what you will, though: you're a Thorne, after all, and isn't it right and fit that you should have something from Brackenhill?"

(Oh wonderful concession from Godfrey Thorne, that any human being had right to part or lot in Brackenhill!)

"You needn't fear," he went on. "I'll ask but one thing from you in return."

"Ah!" And Percival turned swiftly

and fixed his great eyes on him. The cloven foot was peeping out at last, he thought. "And that is—?" he demanded.

"That you'll be happy."

"Oh! Well, to accommodate you, I'll try," said Percival, forgetful that happiness, like sleep, comes not with trying. "But it all depends on Sissy, you know."

Did it? He asked himself the question as he crossed the hall in search of her. He thought it did. But who could tell what would be for his happiness, say, in seven years' time? This, however, he knew—that he wanted Sissy, wanted to pet her and call her his own, to lift her out of her mysterious sorrow, set her on high, his queen and darling, and do battle for her with all the world if need were. In love with her? Deeply? Passionately? Of course he was. But Mr. Percival Thorne had surely no business to be able to speculate concerning the nature and duration of happiness as he went on his way that morning.

Not in the drawing-room, not in the breakfast-room, not in her own little sitting-room up stairs, where he had the right of entry. In the hall lay a soft felt hat of his, which Mrs. Middleton hated because she said it made him look like a brigand. He caught it up and went out into the garden.

It was a foggy, slate-colored day, with a faint breeze, which came now and then like a long-drawn sigh. The evergreens dropped heavy tears upon the sodden soil. The dull curtain of cloud hung so low that it forced you to wonder what it concealed. It was impossible to imagine that the arch of sunny blue could be behind it: it rather seemed as if it must veil some ghastly whiteness. Percival, who came out whistling a tune, paused, looked up at the clouds and round at the dank and dripping world, and, after a useless search on the terrace and in the conservatory, went with noiseless steps across the spongy turf. "Sissy has no business out to-day," he thought: "I'll bring her in. Why, one might paint the whole thing with a wash of India ink, then wipe most of it out again with a wet sponge, and the result would be a tolerably faithful representation of this

delicious atmospherical effect." His short cut had brought him to a high yew hedge, through which he passed into a sheltered enclosure, formal and trim, where old traditions lived from year to year in newly-springing green. That it looked dreary was a proof of the utter dreariness of the day, for Percival had noticed many a time that if a stray sunbeam found its way within those walls of green, it seemed to be entangled there and to linger, feebly brightening the stiff hedges, the yellow paths and the bushy borderings of box, when there was no sunlight anywhere else. Even to-day the clipped yews were a little less mournful than sweeping cedars on the lawn. "Upon my word," said Percival to himself, "our ancestors, barbarous though their taste might be, understood gardening for a foggy November day. For clearness of outline in this universal smear give me two pepper-boxes, a lion and a dolphin when old Knowles has lately been at them with his shears." He passed the fountain in the middle, whose once white stone had been softened by time to mossy gray-green. "What a merciful thing it isn't spouting now!" he thought with a shiver, eying the portly presiding Neptune over his shoulder as he went by. "A fellow ought to put on a blue coat and powder his hair to do his courting here.—Sissy!"

No answer. Percival and Neptune had the winter-garden all to themselves. When he had convinced himself of this fact he tilted the soft hat a little more over his brows, and stood with his hands deep in his pockets, a very nineteenth-century figure indeed, lost in profound thought and staring at the dolphin. Should he seek farther or not? An arm-chair by the fireside would be very comfortable, and where to look for Sissy next he hardly knew. But the slight check had quickened his eagerness, and he started again in search of her, determined not to be baffled, though he should have to cross the park and look for her in the village.

He had hardly made up his mind to this when he found her. All at once he came in sight of a melancholy little figure

wandering to and fro, and he stopped to look, himself unseen.

It was a lonely part of the grounds, half kitchen-garden, half orchard, and Sissy paced slowly along a mossy path, with apple and cherry boughs above her head. It was not a cheerful place. Percival remembered that he had liked and praised it once in the spring, when buds were swelling on the trees and strong green shoots were pushing through the earth. It was fairer yet when the angular branches overhead were heaped with faintly-flushed flowers or loaded with the snow of cherry-blossom. But now blossom and fruit alike were gone, and only a few poor leaves, yellowing and coarse, hung feebly on the boughs and shook against the curtain of dull gray. Under them, weary yet restless, went the little figure, pacing to and fro.

Percival stood gazing. To him there came a little gust of wind with a startled shiver, and departed as it came. The silence which followed was so strangely sad that the glowing fervor of his glance was quenched and it grew resolute and grave.

"Sissy!" he called aloud: "Sissy!"

She turned her head slowly and lifted great pathetic eyes, full of the apprehensive expression they had learned of late. As he came forward, with the shadow on his dark face, she shrank a little, as if he had frightened her, not stepping back, but drawing herself together. In another moment, however, she had recovered her self-possession and greeted him with a faint smile. He smiled in answer, and turned to walk by her side. The frightened look gradually forsook her eyes, only to come back with his first words.

They had walked almost the length of the path in silence, but near the farther end Percival halted and stood kicking a pebble which was embedded in the ground. "Sissy," he said (she had also paused, two or three steps away, half lingering, half longing to escape)—"Sissy, tell me what's the matter with you. You are as different as night from day from what you used to be. You are like the girl in *Auld Robin Gray*. You 'gang

like a ghaist,' Sissy, and you 'carena much to spin.' Why is it so, dear?"

"I suppose that means that I don't often do any tatting now. Percival, I don't think I ever did care much about it. It isn't good for anything when it's done."

He took a step toward her. "You were always an idle little woman, weren't you?" he said gently. "But you used to be so bright. And now—" After a moment's pause he spoke in a tone of abrupt command: "Sissy, lift your head—look up at me. Ah, you can't: your eyes are full of tears."

They brimmed over and fell, tears of childish compassion for herself.

"Tell me, dear," he went on, resuming his former manner, "can I help you in any way? Is anything wrong?"

She shook her head.

"But there must be," he persisted gravely. "Don't you see how sad the whole house is because you are unhappy?"

"Don't tease me so," she said hurriedly. Then, "Oh, Percival, be good to me: don't scold me."

"Scold you! never!" A beseeching little hand had been laid on his sleeve, and quick as thought his own had covered and clasped the quivering fingers. "Be good to you! I love you far too well to be anything else. Sissy, let me be *good* to you always. Will you marry me, dear, and whatever troubles may be in store for us, let us face them together?"

It was briefly spoken in Percival's earnest voice. There was no need for many words.

She looked up into his face, and he was startled by her perplexed and frightened glance. But the next moment it had vanished, and she let him draw her to him and laid her cheek on his shoulder, as if she had found her happy resting-place at last.

When he lifted his head again it seemed to him that a slight but unmistakable change had passed over the sorrowful landscape. The autumn leaves which shook against the sky surely were stirred by a faint yet most tender breath of spring. The heavy veil of gray was lifted a little, and lightened by a yellow gleam. There

was something vernal even in the damp and chilly air, and Percival would hardly have been surprised had the garden-beds shown a few pale and leafless flowers, heralds of a bright array to come.

As they stood under the black orchard-boughs she was silent and clinging, he was confident and proud. The song which had haunted his midnight watch haunted him still, and he whistled it, with his arm round Sissy.

"What is that?" she said.

For all answer, instead of whistling, he softly sang,

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve,

and looked down at her with eloquent eyes.

"Does that mean me, Percival?"

"My darling girl," laughed Percival, "do you suppose it could possibly mean any one else?"

She laughed too, and then sighed.

"So, you see," he went on, "we must be as happy as if our engagement commenced on the very last page of a three-volume novel."

"No, no," said Sissy, "I don't like that. Please, don't talk as if the romance were all done. No: I'll wish it to be at the beginning of a novel, not at the end."

Percival assumed a tragic attitude of despair. Then he smiled again: "Oh, the ill-omened wish! If a spiteful fairy should be hiding behind one of those apple trees, we are ruined, Sissy—utterly undone. Don't you know that first-volume marriages *cannot* turn out well? They ought to be forbidden by act of Parliament. Jealousy—weariness—misunderstandings—fiends instead of friends—secrets of the most uncomfortable kind,—do not all these belong to first-volume marriages? You get safer as you approach the end of the third, but the last paragraph is the best. The artist is tired, so he dashes in an expanse of cloudless blue—saves detail. The writer has had enough, so he scribbles in 'rapture, bliss,' and would be glad to know what fault any one can find with *that*. Never mind the romance, Sissy: it's sure to give one a brain fever, an accident or two, a hair's-

breadth escape from the tide, and threads of silver in one's still abundant hair. Let's stick to the last page, where there isn't even time to find out that we are quite different people to what we were always supposed to be. What a shock it would be," he went on, "to have to practise a new signature—wouldn't one dream of being tried for forgery every night?—and to discover that one had two quite new grandmothers, perhaps some uncles and aunts and innumerable first and second cousins! What do you say, Sissy?"

"I think, perhaps, it had better be the last page," she said, ignoring the fact that the decision hardly rested with her or with him. "You mustn't change, anyhow, Percival: you must never change."

"Everything changes," said he as he kicked the mossy stone from its resting-place. "And everybody changes except mummies. They don't, I suppose, but I hope I'm not a mummy. My foolish darling, don't look so sad and scared. Don't you know that the secret of love is that we shall change together, and always draw nearer?"

She smiled, but was only half convinced. "Don't change *much*, then," she said, "or I sha'n't keep pace with you."

How often it happens that we cannot say what we should like to say! As they walked toward the house Sissy would have liked to say, "Percival, why did you go to meet Miss Adelaide Blake that night in Langley Wood?" Not that she distrusted him. On the contrary, her trust in him was very nearly perfect, or she would have feared both question and answer, only she felt that she should have liked to know.

If the question had been put, it would have been met by a counter-question from Percival; and most likely there would have been a little light thrown on a mystery or two, and a change effected in my hero's destiny. But for several reasons the question was an impossible one to put, and Sissy contented herself with something more general.

"Why, no," said Percival in reply. "I certainly won't say that I never thought



"If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve."—Page 94.

anything about any girl before. And if I could say it, it would only prove me to be a dull, cold-blooded fellow, I think. But, Sissy, it would be folly to compare

my thoughts of any others, at any time, with my thoughts of you to-day."

Sissy was content. As they drew near the house she looked up at the window

which had caused her so much anxiety a few hours earlier.

"No burglars came, after all," said Percival. "You slept well? Ah! that's right. It was more than Master George did, I'll be bound."

"Have you said anything to Duncan or anybody?"

"Not yet." The tone threatened a speedy disclosure.

There are things painful at the time they occur, but pleasant, and even precious, as memories. Sissy felt almost grateful to George. "Don't say anything about it, please."

"My dear child, your kindness would be utterly wasted," said Percival. "He will never do any good: he is much too stupid."

"I feel just like that sometimes," said Sissy pensively.

"Good Heavens! You are not going to compare yourself to George, I hope!" Percival exclaimed, with the more heat because he remembered that likeness in their frightened eyes which had so annoyed him.

"Not if you don't like it. But you don't mean to say No to the first thing I ask you?"

He shrugged his shoulders: "I yield, of course. George is spared, but, as he has no idea that he has alarmed any one but myself, he will not know to whom he is indebted. Consequently, he will feel no gratitude, but, comparing my resolute language of last night with my meek behavior of to-day, he will decide that I am rather soft. Be it so. But why do you care about it, Sissy?"

"I don't know. Only, somehow, I feel as if I shouldn't like a spider to be hurt to-day."

He whistled: "Oh! if it has come to *that*—"

For Sissy, who would cheerfully confront a caterpillar of the first magnitude, or a family party of earwigs collected for a great house-warming in a dahlia, or even a black beetle if the tongs were very handy, had a horror of spiders. She could not account for it. "Too many legs, don't you think?" she had said once, but she was reminded that

when a large centipede walked straight at her out of a dish of filberts, and even the squire was discomposed, she had calmly encountered and vanquished the intruder, without stopping to reckon the number of his legs. So she gave it up, only suggesting that she thought it *might* be that they were alike all round and she didn't know which way they were going to run. At any rate, the fact remained that she had a nervous horror of spiders, and always flew at one with the agonized ferocity which is born of extreme fear. So, when she said she should not like a spider to be hurt, Percival knew that she was indeed in charity with all created things. And George was pardoned.

Mrs. Middleton heard of the engagement without much surprise, and with some pleasure. Her cherished day-dream, the marriage of her two favorites, had already become a thing of the past. It had been very bright and real to her in old days, when Horace was a tall, handsome lad who idolized little Sissy, carried her on his shoulder, bought presents for her with his pocket-money, and spoiled her so that she cared for no one else while he was home for the holidays. Aunt Harriet could remember the dreadful night or two at the beginning of each quarter when Sissy refused comfort and sobbed herself to sleep, only to dream that Horace had come back, and to awake and weep anew. But of late years, though at times she had hoped, I think she knew in her heart that it was in vain. What could have drawn Sissy away from Horace to Percival she could not imagine. Since, however, her dream was not to be realized—and in poor Horace's state of health she could not even wish it—she allowed that Percival Thorne would do as well as any one else in the neighborhood. Better than young William Falconer, who was much too fond of billiards, or Harry Hardwicke, their lawyer's son, who was a nice fellow and would be tolerably well off, but was not overburdened with brains. Mrs. Middleton could not get rid of her old doubt whether she really knew Percival. But if Sissy liked him, that was the principal thing, and the old lady believed that he

might make her darling happy. "You will take great care of her, won't you?" she said anxiously. "And you won't be hard on her? Promise me, Percival."

"Hard on Sissy!" said the young fellow after an interval of speechless amazement. "What can you possibly be thinking of, Aunt Harriet? Shall I promise you at the same time that I won't murder your maid nor brutally ill-use my grandfather?"

Mr. Thorne was delighted beyond expression. His great idea seemed to be that he must pet Sissy in some way, and he racked his brains to discover what would please her.

She laughed at him. "You would like to put an extra lump of sugar in my tea, wouldn't you?" she said, "or to spread some on my bread and butter? I know you would."

"You are much too grown up for that, my dear."

"I suppose I am. Oh, it's a dreadful thing, being grown up!"

"Is it? You don't mean that, Sissy, so I won't tell tales of you. What can we find to console you for having ceased to take pleasure in sugared bread and butter?"

"Percival does as well as anything," said Sissy.

"No doubt. At the same time, is there any reason why we should not get some of the old diamonds reset?"

Her eyes were brighter than the promised stones: "Percival likes diamonds, and—and—so do I." And Mr. Thorne wrote to a jeweller on the subject that very day.

Godfrey Hammond heard of the approaching marriage, and said to himself, "I told you so." He would often take considerable trouble to bring about the events he predicted, merely that he might say those four words. In this case he

had proved a true prophet without any effort on his part, so no doubt he was pleased, though he made no further remark than "Happy pair—to be so young!" and proceeded to arrange the details of a select little dinner-party.

Three people heard the news far away. One laid down the letter and said, "So that is the end of all Master Percy's fine talk? and a very quick end too. He was never going to marry a girl with a farthing more than he had himself. Why, Sissy has eight hundred a year, if she has a penny."

"And how do you know he has not as much as she has?" asked the lady by his side.

"He? Oh no! I know he hasn't anything like that. Oh! I see what you mean. Of course I can't tell what the governor has done."

"Old Aunt Middleton is very fond of Sissy, isn't she?"

"Fond of Sissy? I should think she was! Dear little Sissy! I hope she'll be happy."

"Then, my dear boy, you have lost your last friend at Brackenhill."

"Rubbish!" was the hasty answer. "Why shouldn't she be my friend still, and Sissy too?"

"Oh, well, of course they may, if your cousin Percival pleases. Perhaps he will."

The first speaker turned impatiently away to the silent member of the party, who was looking out of the window with a preoccupied face, and who hardly moved at the touch of his hand.

"And what do you say?" he inquired.

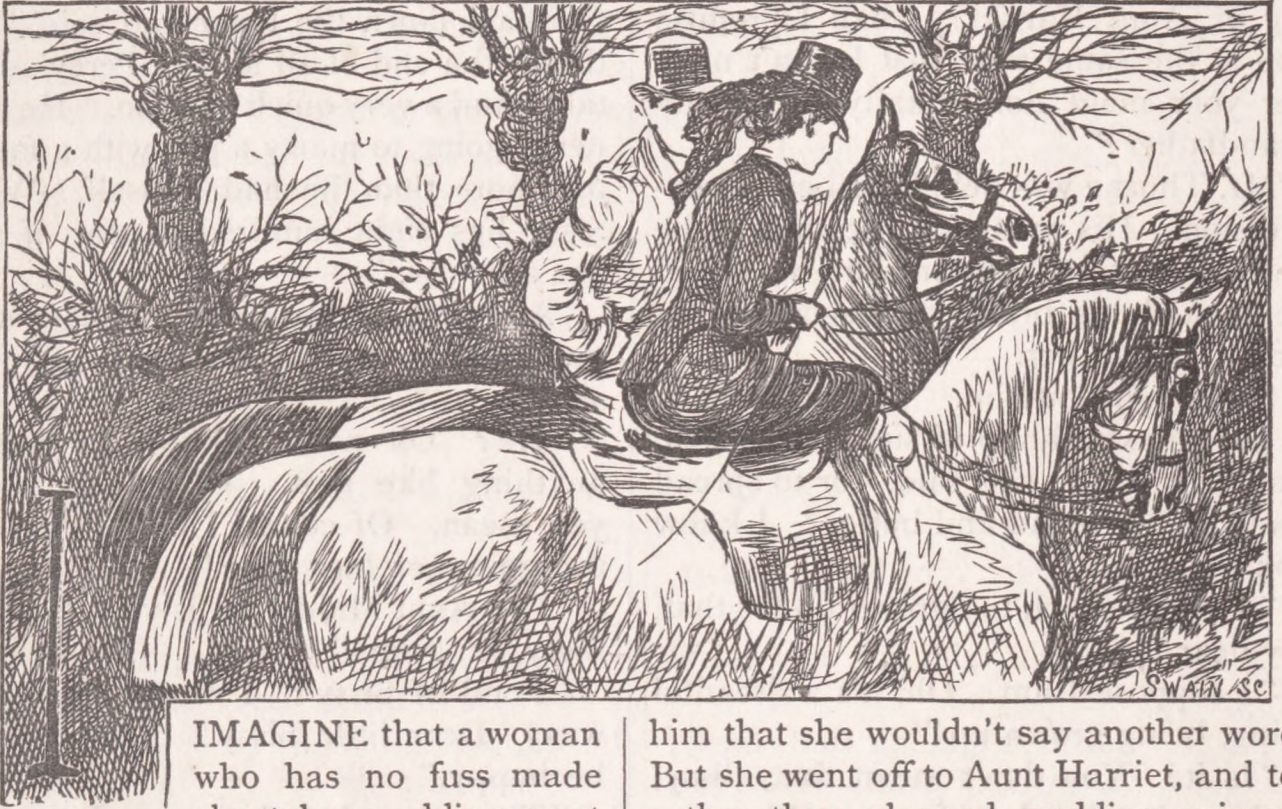
"Nothing."

"But you have been listening, haven't you? I want you to say something."

"Then I will say this: Mr. Percival Thorne means to have everything his own way. And if you let him—"



CHAPTER XIX.—SISSY CONSULTS HER ORACLE.



IMAGINE that a woman who has no fuss made about her wedding must feel much as a man might if he could wake up and find that he had eaten a good dinner while in a state of unconsciousness. The desired end would be attained in both cases—she would be married and he would be fed—but I think the two sufferers would agree that it was attained in a most unsatisfactory way. Of course there are exceptions—women who do not care about orange-blossoms and feeble speech-making, as there are men who eat to live, not to mention those who profess not to care. But Sissy belonged to neither division of exceptions. She liked the pomps and vanities of an orthodox wedding; and she owned it. White satin was the pomp which she especially desired, but she felt bound to consult Percival on the subject. "Should you like me in that?" she inquired.

He replied that he thought it very likely he should—that he liked her very well as far as he had gone, and would endeavor to preserve his sentiments unchanged—at any rate, through the honeymoon.

Sissy sighed over his folly, and told

him that she wouldn't say another word. But she went off to Aunt Harriet, and together they planned wedding-raiment which should fall in beautiful folds of sheen and shade.

Meanwhile, Mr. Thorne was planning great rejoicings—dinner for all the tenants, a feast for the school-children, flags, arches, bonfires and fireworks. Mrs. Middleton would have been better pleased with these schemes had the bridegroom been any one but Percival. Who would not suppose that these great doings marked the marriage of the heir?

"What then?" said the squire.

"But he is not your heir."

"If he isn't, what does it signify? Let those laugh that win. Horace, for instance, when he wins."

"You are having the diamonds set for Sissy." Mrs. Middleton was divided between pleasure and vexation. It seemed like treachery to her absent favorite.

"Why not? I shall never like Horace's wife as well as I like Percival's. Shall you?"

She was silenced for the time. But, choosing a moment when Sissy was out of the way, she said, not exactly to Percival, yet in his hearing, "I hope the

wedding will be late enough in the year for Horace to be with us. I shouldn't like people to think that we made all this fuss as if he were of no account and never coming back."

Mr. Thorne exclaimed angrily, "Harriet, what are you talking about? are you out of your mind? Of course he is coming back—some time or other. As to the wedding, I dare say we may manage to make it secure and legal either way." But Percival vowed to himself that the day should be so fixed as to make sure of Horace's return.

He talked to Sissy about it, and she quite agreed with him. At least, she said she did, and that in a very eager tone. So they decided that the wedding should be late in the spring or early in the summer. But why did he go away with the idea that there was an undercurrent of fear and anxiety in her mind, and that she would rather not see Horace among the guests? He pondered the matter a while, and then told himself that he was a fool for his pains.

He ought to have been very happy that winter. He was devoted to Sissy, and was almost continually at Brackenhill. But he was anxious and uneasy. Even when he was in one of his silent moods he would follow her with his eyes or pay her mute little attentions. However absent he might seem to be, he always heard when Sissy spoke, and never forgot what she said. He gave his mind wholly to the fulfilment of his pledge—

I will die ere she shall grieve—

and knew that he gave it in vain. For in her wayward April fashion Sissy was grieving still.

There were days when she was bright and laughing—others when she was shrinking and sad. Percival was baffled. He had expected to have his own way in everything, and intended to use his power wisely and tenderly for Sissy's good. Instead of which she perplexed him. Formerly she denied that there was anything the matter with her. Now she changed her tactics, owned that she thought she was not very well, and thus accounted for low spirits and nervous

fears. She was willing to see a doctor—two doctors—half a dozen if they liked. But they were very silly, she thought. If they left her alone she would soon be all right, of course. She rather thought it was the weather. January was too cold, February was just as bad, March was too windy and bleak. In the latter month she put off her recovery for a little while, expressing a fear that April would be too showery—

"And May too flowery, I suppose?" said Percival in a tone of tender chiding. "Oh, Sissy! Sissy!"

Whereupon a tear trembled on her lashes and fell, and, clinging to him, she hid her face.

"Dear," he said, "it isn't the weather."

"Then what is it?" said she in her innocent voice.

And when he could only answer, "But, Sissy, that is what I want you to tell me," she clasped her slender hands about his neck and drew his head down to hers.

"I think you had better not take any notice of me," she said. "When I used to pull the flowers about in my little garden, and watered them every day, they never seemed to grow. You are all too good to me: I think you won't let me get well."

Percival smiled at her new theory, and promised to wait and see what time would do. Nevertheless, he was disappointed. If a doctor prescribes a remedy which he believes to be infallible, it is disheartening, to say the least of it, to find it utterly useless. How much more if it happened to be his own heart's blood, his whole life and energy and devotion, which he had bestowed to heal his patient, and found it spent without result!

One day at luncheon Mr. Thorne announced that he thought of making a slight alteration in the garden—nothing important; just a fresh path, abolishing a border and laying down a bit of turf. With the help of a water-bottle and two decanters for trees, and some plates and knives and forks to represent other natural objects, he succeeded in making the nature of the proposed change clear to his sister.

"But you will do away with Horace's border, as we always called it," she objected.

"The border by the tulip tree? Yes, that goes, of course."

"Oh, Godfrey, you mustn't do that. Why, I remember him, when he was quite a mite, digging away there in his little shirt-sleeves; and how hot he used to get over it, to be sure! I can see him now leaning on his little spade while he wiped his face, and then setting to work again like—" Mrs. Middleton looked vaguely round for a comparison—"like anything! And growing radishes and mustard and cress there! Oh, Godfrey, you don't remember!"

"Yes," said Mr. Thorne, who had been mechanically replacing the materials of his plan in their original positions—"yes, I do. I can vouch for the substantial accuracy of your interesting recollections. If my memory serves me, the salad was brought to table by Horace himself, and was gritty." As he spoke he poured some sherry from the decanter which had been the tulip tree. "I want a gravel-path," he said, and sipped his wine.

"Alter your gravel-path, then, and have it by all means," was the quick reply—"anywhere but through poor Horace's border."

Mr. Thorne quietly began to construct his plan anew: "Through the pond with Sissy's pet water-lilies, my dear? Or shall I cut down the great beech tree? Or demolish the old sun-dial?"

"Then do without your gravel-path. You have plenty of gravel-paths, without making any more."

"Quite true. But I have a fancy for this one, and as Horace has given up digging—What do you say, young people?—You, Percival?"

"I am sure that Horace would be the first to agree to your path if he were here. I am quite certain he would not object. At the same time, isn't it a pity to uproot old memories? They grow slowly, and won't bear transplanting."

"Well, *you* haven't committed yourself, at any rate," said Mrs. Middleton. "Isn't that a comfort?"

"A great comfort." A slight smile

flickered over his face, and he went on with his luncheon.

"Percival is right," said Mr. Thorne. "Horace wouldn't care. In fact, I think he would rather not do his sowing—mustard and cress, wild oats, whatever it may be—so immediately under my eyes now-a-days. And as to old memories, they don't grow in that border. Nothing grows there except verbenas and mignonette, which are none of Horace's planting. You may just as well walk along my path and think of him in his shirt-sleeves, eating cress in the sweat of his brow, as look at those flowers and do it."

"Much you know about it!" said Aunt Harriet in a tone of lofty scorn. "I'll trouble you for a glass of that madeira, Godfrey. You do understand wine."

"Thank you!" said the squire, with a quick little bow. There was a moment's pause—one of those pauses which may mean anything or nothing, and may end abruptly in anger or laughter. He broke the silence: "Arbitration is the thing: don't all the papers say so? We will amicably refer the matter to Sissy. As she has not yet spoken, she shall decide."

"Sissy, indeed!" Aunt Harriet looked fondly at the silent girl.—"My dear, you are eating nothing; do let me—"

"No bribery! She must be an impartial judge."

"As if you didn't know she would say what Percival says! Of course."

"I defy her to hold the balance so evenly, to blow hot and cold so accurately," laughed Mr. Thorne.—"Yes or No? Now, Sissy, must the border be kept as an everlasting memorial of Horace and his cress, or may I have my gravel-path?—such a nice gravel-path, and you shall walk on it. Which is it to be?"

Sissy kept her eyes on her plate, but her answer came without a moment's hesitation, low yet distinct: "You may have your path."

"Oh, Sissy!" Mrs. Middleton exclaimed in a tone of pained reproach. Even Percival uttered a little exclamation of surprise and pushed away his plate. Sis-

sy's voice had been constrained, yet so resolute.

Mr. Thorne half smiled, and leaning toward her said, almost in a whisper, "You and I think much the same about Master Horace, I fancy."

She looked him full in the face. "I'm not so sure of that," she said aloud, and suddenly rising she left the room.

They all exchanged glances, anxious to read and not to be read. Mrs. Middleton's face softened. "I don't think Sissy is very well to-day," she said. And after a few minutes, when they left the table, she went in search of her.

Opening the door of the little sitting-room, she walked in without knocking.

The girl started to her feet, sweeping a quantity of papers together: "What do you want?—Oh, Aunt Harriet, I didn't see—I beg your pardon." As she spoke she thrust some of the loose sheets into a shabby little writing-case. But the old lady had recognized them. They were from Horace, the carefully-penned letters which the schoolboy had sent to the little girl who could not "read writing," as the children say, mixed with the scrawled notes of later days.

"My dear, what are you doing?" said Aunt Harriet, and took her in her arms and kissed her.

"I thought you would be angry with me," said Sissy.

"I was surprised, I think. But you were quite right, dear. Godfrey had better have his path: he wants it, and I was only foolish about it."

"I'll never walk on it," said Sissy. "Never!"

"Ah! you didn't want poor Horry's border done away? I thought you couldn't."

"Yes, I did. Don't ask me any questions, please." And she disengaged herself and turned away.

"But, Sissy, I must ask you one thing. You didn't wish it, I am sure, though you said it was to be. Was it because you thought it would please Percival?"

"Oh no! no! It was all my own doing. Percival wouldn't have said it, and wouldn't have wished it. I did it all myself."

"I can't understand you," said poor Aunt Harriet. "Tell me what you mean, darling. It was your own wish. Then why—" and she looked at the papers crushed into the case and scattered on the table.

Sissy tried hard to keep her voice level, but it was quavering and insecure. "I think he'll die," she said. And flying past Aunt Harriet, she took refuge in her bedroom, where the old lady judged it inexpedient to pursue her.

About this time Sissy used to ask Percival questions apropos of nothing that he could make out. Once she attacked him on the old subject of heroism.

"You won't ever expect me to be a heroine, will you?" she said. "You know how weak and silly I am. I shall never be like Charlotte Corday, Percival."

"Heaven forbid that you should!" said he. Thus, to Sissy's relief, he accepted the fact that his future wife would never have nerve enough to go and stab anybody, in a most satisfactory manner. He was less of a hero in his own thoughts, and shrank from his old dream of a woman of the heroic type. "No, no!" he said. "Those startling women are all very well, but not to marry."

"I thought you liked Charlotte Corday so much?"

"I admire her after a fashion. But, dear, you have put it out of my power to play the part of Adam Lux."

"Who was he?"

Percival told her of the love which burst into flower as the sentence was spoken and the death-cart went its way through the curses of the mob. Girl-like, though she was half repelled by Charlotte, she was ready to weep over this man who had loved her. She sat with her hands in her lap, pondering the life which kindled so suddenly to a blaze of melancholy passion and came to so swift an end, as if one should be consumed by a spark from a far-off star.

"But why do you think so much about Charlotte Corday?" asked Percival.

"I don't; only I wanted to make sure that you quite understand what I am. You do, don't you?"

"My darling, I should hope I did by this time."

(As if it were a slight thing to understand a fellow-creature! But it is a remarkable fact that people are equally certain that they understand and that they are never understood.)

Another day she found him sitting by the fireside with a paper trying to work out a chess-problem. She stole her hand round his elbow and took away a knight. He captured her retreating fingers, replaced his piece, and went on musing with her hand in his. Their two glances—his intent, hers absent—were fixed upon the board.

At last she sighed.

"What is it?" said he, not looking up.

"I want to know something."

"I want to know many things. For instance, why does this man say, 'White to move, and mate in three moves,' when I can't manage anything but a stalemate? What business has he to be cleverer than I am?" He stared at the opposing forces for a minute. "Bah! I can't see it;" and, pushing back his chair, he raised his eyes: "Let's hear your puzzle: it may be easier to solve."

She passed her hand lightly over his strong waves of hair: "Percival, when people are just dead—"

He arched his brows a little.

"—Do they know what we are saying and thinking about them?"

"Your problem is far more difficult than mine. I can't tell you, Sissy."

"But do tell me what you think," she entreated.

"I don't know what to think. I don't suppose they feel the affairs of our world to be half as important as we imagine them. I fancy, for instance, that a great man just entering on a new existence, with all its possibilities, *must* have something better to do than to sit down, cross his legs (I speak figuratively) and read the obituary notices in all the papers."

Sissy was not satisfied: "You think they wouldn't care, but could they know if they liked? Because there are some things they would care about."

"Of course there are."

"Suppose a man had done something

unkind to his friend, and hidden it," Sissy went on. "If the friend died, would he know all about it?"

"How can I tell?" he mused. "As if a dead chief should see in a lightning-flash that his trusted right-hand man was a traitor? Well, he might, Sissy; but he would see it differently, I think—more reasons for pardon, perhaps—a clearer understanding of motives."

"Then perhaps he would not be so angry," said Sissy thoughtfully.

Percival did not heed, but after a moment went on: "Some people are always longing for speech with those gone before, and are ready to snatch at anything which they think assures them that the old bonds are as closely knit as ever. That is why Spiritualism flourishes and every medium finds a circle of believers pining for news from the spirit-world. I hate the idea. Do they think our planet rolls on its way surrounded by a gray and misty atmosphere—for these things are done in the dusk—alive with phantoms? And these ghosts have nothing more urgent to do than to communicate in some imperfect fashion with those who still enjoy the daylight? Who would not rather think of them as far away, leaving the old world behind them like a dull little blot, doing new work with new energy, ready to meet us and to recognize us with clearer eyes than of old as we in our turn emerge into the better life? Suppose you died and left me, my little Sissy—I can't spare you, dear: you mustn't—would I not rather dream of you as utterly out of my reach, living perhaps in some distant star, than think that you, who have talked to me so often with your sweet lips and eyes and hands, were trying to explain your feelings with the help of a table, two or three chairs, a concertina, a bunch of flowers and a half-hysterical medium? The very idea is horrible! As if you should send me a kiss by the housemaid!"

"Good gracious, Percival!" exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, opening the door. "What are you talking about?"

"Spiritualism, my dear aunt," was the demure reply.

"Hm! Well, you know, I suppose,"

and she eyed him doubtfully, "it didn't sound very spiritual."

"But that's its peculiarity," he replied: "it never does."

And, laughing in his sleeve at her bewilderment, he gave no more thought to the question whence his discourse arose. And Sissy said no more, but extracted what comfort she could from the utterances of her oracle.

She needed further comfort a day or two later. The rector's wife, who had known her ever since she came to Brackenhill, called suddenly upon her one afternoon. Mrs. Bradley was a good woman in her way, but it was a remarkably unpleasant way. She wished to be good, she tried to be good, and the result was that she was an awful example of goodness. She would have been as invaluable to a scoffer as is an incorrigible drunkard to a temperance lecturer. She carried what she called "the Truth" about with her as a weapon of offence. The text about giving an account of every idle word had entered into her very soul, and she brought it down like a sledge-hammer on every jest or airy bit of nonsense. She had always before her mind's eye the vision of a book in which all the vain speaking of the world was recorded, to be read out at the last day. She did not consider how much an occasional flash of humor would lighten this appalling work, nor had it ever struck her that this view of the case might perhaps make prosiness the unpardonable sin. She flew upon poor Sissy at once with an involved sentence about her approaching marriage—a new life, new duties, "and, remember, new responsibilities."

"Oh, but Percival is going to take those," said Sissy. "I think he likes them."

"He cannot take them," said Mrs. Bradley austere, grating the words one against the other as they came out.

Sissy only replied by a nervous little laugh, and was reproved for levity.

Then the clergywoman went on to tell her that she had never taken sufficient interest in her fellow-creatures, and that now was the time to make a fresh start and deliberately to aim at doing good.

There was enough truth in the accusation to make the poor little victim wince. Caring for her fellow-creatures and doing good meant giving things to the poor and talking to them, she supposed; and she was well aware that she had never done anything of the kind. Aunt Harriet had always disposed of her boots, indeed of all her old clothes, without consulting her; and she had not taken to district visiting, Sunday-school teaching or any sort of parish work. She had an idea that it was wrong to be so indifferent, but she was quite sure that she could not possibly go calling at cottages, giving away tickets and reading chapters to sick people. If that were goodness, she must continue wicked.

Mrs. Bradley waited for her to speak.

"Oh, I'll think about it," said Sissy hurriedly, with a terrible certainty in her heart that she should think about it against her will. "But I sha'n't be able to do anything at present. We are not going to have a house just at first: we mean to travel."

"There is an immense field for such work on the Continent," was the remorseless reply.

"Oh no! oh no! I couldn't, really," exclaimed Sissy, alternately hot and cold in her terror lest a pledge of some kind should be extorted from her—to give a tract to the pope perhaps, or publicly to denounce Italian idolatry.

"Among those benighted nations—" Mrs. Bradley began.

"But I couldn't talk to them. Percival is going to do all the talking."

"I hope—I can but hope, Sissy—that you will not rely too much on Mr. Percival Thorne."

"But I have forgotten such a lot of my French, you can't think. And, Mrs. Bradley, I never did know any Italian except two songs, and they are not Sunday ones. Perhaps when we get back and are settled—"

"Do not deceive yourself," said Mrs. Bradley awfully. "Do not put it off to a convenient season. When you are settled, you say; but you will never be settled. Here we have *no* continuing city. Oh, remember that!"

About this time Mrs. Middleton arrived, and Sissy managed to escape—how she hardly knew, except that it was not without a parting word. She ran down the garden to find Percival. "Oh dear! how dreadful she is!" thought Sissy as she fled. "I do believe I promised to wrestle in prayer, or how could it have got into my head? Well, I'm glad it isn't any worse. What would Percival say if I went giving those nasty tracts to the waiters and people and leaving them about the hotels?"

She found him, and as soon as she had a little recovered her breath and her composure she told him of the interview, mimicking most of it cleverly enough, in spite of a little unsteady laugh which would come at intervals. Percival, leaning on the fence, laughed too in quiet enjoyment of Mrs. Bradley's rasping tones as Sissy reproduced them for his benefit.

"Oh yes, it's all very fine for you," she said when her story was finished, "standing there smiling, with your hands in your pockets, and hearing it all, now that it's over!"

"But it wasn't so pleasant for you? No, poor child."

"Nor for Aunt Harriet now," said Sissy.

"Good Heavens! Aunt Harriet is still in her clutches? What shall we do, Sissy? Shall we go and make faces at Mrs. Bradley through the window? or raise an alarm of fire? Suggest something."

"Then I'll suggest that I think I hear her pony-chaise driving away. Look out by those larches: she must pass there."

"And so she does!" he exclaimed after half a minute of suspense.

"Percival," said Sissy, "she's an awful woman."

"She is."

"But I'm afraid what she said is partly true. Don't you think one ought to try and do good to people? I never have. I'm afraid it's wrong."

He recoiled in dismay: "You haven't pledged yourself to do good to me? Sissy, speak!"

"Don't be silly: I'm serious."

"Then I think I ought to have been

told beforehand. Oh, Sissy, so is Mrs. Bradley! Be warned in time."

"But I mean it, Percival. It isn't that I want to do any one any good particularly," said Sissy with delicious frankness, "but I'm afraid I ought. Isn't it very wicked not to care? Don't you think I ought to try?"

"No, I don't," said Percival.

"No? Why?"

"It is such a confused business at present," he answered. "Suppose you set a hundred people to explain the art of doing good, you would get a hundred different ideas as to what was meant. Suppose I meet a beggar and give him sixpence, is it a merit or a crime? No opinion on the subject is anything like unanimous. So, till they make up their minds—unless I am very much inclined the other way—I think I may as well keep my sixpences: they are handy things. Why should I part with them on purpose to be told that I have demoralized somebody?"

"But, Percival, I don't understand. Oughtn't anybody to try to do good?"

"The people who have a vocation," he replied—"the people who, blunder as they will, prejudiced and ignorant though they may be, harm though they may sometimes do, yet rise above it all and bless the world by sheer force of love. If you have this sublime calling, well. But doing good, as popularly understood, or misunderstood, is such a horribly aggressive proceeding! I would as soon go about giving people shocks, on the chance that galvanism might be good for some of them. Be kind in small things, mercifully just in great: try not to do any harm. It isn't a very exalted ideal perhaps, Sissy, but I haven't got any further yet."

"Is that really all?" she said.

"I'm not used to summing up my ideas. Suppose I add, Look up and wait."

"But, Percival," she hesitated, "if that were all, you wouldn't think so very much about it if any one told a fib."

"What?" he exclaimed. "What can you think of me, Sissy? Good Heavens! Why, truthfulness is an absolute

necessity if one would not despise one's self and all mankind. It is the very ground we stand on—bare and uncommonly ugly sometimes, I grant you—but without it no building is possible. I did not *say*, 'Be truthful,' and therefore I do not care for truth! You might as well declare that I did not care for modesty because I would not insult a woman by telling her to be modest."

He spoke rapidly and almost fiercely, but paused suddenly as if he had just become aware of it. "I beg your pardon, Sissy," he said in an altered tone. "I can't be very calm on that subject, I'm afraid. There are so many shams now-a-days, down to a sham contempt of shams."

She leant against the fence, gazing at him with frightened eyes. One hand was firmly pressed to still her wildly-beating heart, but when he apologized for his vehemence she faintly smiled.

"I'm afraid that dreadful old woman has upset you a little," he said anxiously.

She acquiesced, and went away. But if the truth which he loved so much could have been revealed, perhaps the blame would have rested on that dreadful young man.

CHAPTER XX.

I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride.

R. BROWNING.

I THINK I am a little tired of stories in which a marvellously clever villain devises an elaborate scheme which I know will be overthrown by a still cleverer detective. I am only irritated by the difficulties he surmounts, because I am certain he will come to a difficulty not to be surmounted. I hate the virtuous detective, while I am apt to take a pitying interest in the villain, and sometimes, to my sudden horror, I have found myself cordially wishing him success in the evil cause for which he has battled so gallantly. I well remember the liking I had as a child for Sisera, because it was said that the stars in their courses fought against him.

Very likely it is true enough that many

a scheme is patiently thought out, skilfully carried on, and ruined at the last moment by some silly oversight which a child might have avoided. But sometimes the truth is just the other way. If, in spite of all precautions, the gallant ship goes down, what frail and unseaworthy vessels have accomplished astounding voyages in safety! If the skilful Alpine climber loses his footing and perishes, what benighted travellers or children or timid women have groped their way in darkness through perils they would have feared to face by day!

Did you ever notice children launching a tiny fleet of walnut-shells with little sails? The wrecks are many and swift, but now and then a boat will glide out of reach and out of sight, dancing gayly and safely over the troubled waters. Sissy had put all Brackenhill into a walnut-shell and launched it. Hitherto it had sailed miraculously well, but the waves were growing high.

The first indication of the rising tempest came one day early in May. On that day a cloud drifted between herself and Percival.

It was a bright, sunshiny morning, more like the May of the poets than that of our ordinary experience. Sissy, who was in great demand among her girl-friends now that her marriage was little more than a month distant, had promised to spend the day with Laura Falconer. Percival was her escort, and they had dispensed with the attendance of a groom on their nine miles' ride. They had both enjoyed it. Never had the country lanes looked more lovely. Their thin new veil of green showed the form of every bough, soon to be lost in the abundant foliage of June. The banks were sprinkled with wild hyacinths, the hedges with hawthorn-blossom, the blue overhead with flakes of whitest cloud. The very air seemed full of life and joy, kissing Sissy's cheeks till they looked as if two wild roses had opened a month before their time, and quickening the blood in Percival's veins, till, blithe and careless, he felt himself one with very spring itself, and in the gladness of the moment quoted—

What if we still ride on, we two,
 With life for ever old yet new,
 Changed not in kind, but in degree,
 The instant made eternity—
 And Heaven just prove that I and she
 Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

"I like that," said Sissy. But after a moment she added, "That is a very strange idea, though. I never fancied there could be any horses in heaven."

Percival laughed. "It seems to me," he said, "that women are far more sentimental than men: you excel us in delicate associations, memories, feelings, but I don't believe you have half the imagination. You are so literal: you must have everything definite. Women believe in tangible white robes, in palms and crowns and golden pavements. The lover dreams of the joy of an endless, buoyant flight through space with his lady, and she questions whether she can admit any animals fit for riding into her conception of heaven!"

"You'll certainly frighten the horses if you go on so," said Sissy. "Do you suppose you have nearly done?"

"Quite," he answered meekly.

"Then you may tell me the name of that poem."

"The Last Ride Together."

"Oh, Percival!" in a tone of reproach. "How could you go quoting such a dreadful thing about us? Aren't you ashamed of yourself, you bad boy?"

"What now? It won't make this our last ride, will it? And if it were the last, I should like to remember that it was perfect enough to deserve the quotation."

(Later he did remember it.)

Sissy remained unconvinced, and declined to hear another syllable about the poem. And just before they reached their destination the poetry of their ride was exchanged for a very unpleasant matter of fact: her horse was decidedly lame.

Percival and the Falconers' groom held a consultation over the injury. He went straight from the stables to the drawing-room, where Sissy was being petted and fondled and questioned about her presents, the bridesmaids' dresses, and all the arrangements for the wedding-day.

"You can't ride Gypsy home," said he.

At this there was some consternation.

Mrs. Falconer declared that Percival should go home by himself, and leave Sissy with them for the night. When that plan was declared impossible, Laura meditated for a moment, and then proposed that as soon as her brother Willie came in he should be sent down to the rectory. "They have such a nice pony there," she said. "Agnes, the eldest girl, often rides it. I am sure they would lend it to you. You could send it back to-morrow."

"Easily, but I don't know them," said Percival. "How can I ask?"

"You are not going to ask them: Willie will do that. He doesn't at all dislike going to the rectory. Oh, we will settle it all, and take the greatest care of poor Gypsy too; so don't bother yourself about it."

Percival declared that she was very kind.

"I only wish we were better off for horses," said Miss Falconer. "But those fat old things of ours— Oh, mamma, don't look so indignant: you know they never do anything but stand there eating their heads off.—Well, then, those magnificent animals which drag our old carriage would not quite do for riding. And Willie's horse is a brute: you can't think how it kicks!"

"That wouldn't do then," said Sissy. "I must go and look at Gypsy, poor old fellow!"

Percival and Laura accompanied her, and while she coaxed her favorite he inquired in an eager aside, "How do you think she looks?"

"Much better," was the answer—"more like herself."

"I am afraid it is partly the ride. She hasn't that pretty rose-color always," he said anxiously. "Still, I am sure she's better, and when I get her away—"

"You think she will be better still? Very likely, for we must remember that this is a trying time for her—so many leave-takings, such a fuss of preparation."

As the three strolled round the garden Laura smiled a little, noticing Percival's constant thought for Sissy. "What devotion!" she said to herself. She could

not but own that this air of watchful and tender courtesy suited him well, and made every little attention seem earnest. "They are a model pair of lovers," she thought. "He looks the character, and he doesn't take the bloom off his courtship with nasty slang either. If I were a painter, I would make a picture of them here and now."

Sissy was saying, "I like your three old cedars on your sloping lawn so much, Laura! When I was a little girl I always thought of Lebanon as something like your garden."

"And smelling just like Keswick, no doubt," Percival suggested.

"Lebanon darkens our drawing-room window a good deal," said Miss Falconer. "And there is no help for it. It would be a sin to cut them down, and you can't prune cedars."

"I don't call your drawing-room dark," said Sissy as they went in.

"Perhaps not at ten minutes to one on a sunshiny spring day. But if it were a November afternoon, or even if the bank of cloud over there came up and hid the sun, you would see."

"I can imagine it," said Percival. "Just now the light is perfect."

The house was partly covered with a vine, and the oriel window had a quivering border of leaves and tendrils. Through the cedars outside came blue gleams of sky like glorious sapphires—gleams which were ten times more deep and lucid for their sombre setting. The room, with its polished floor and paneling, seemed full of golden touches of sunlight, mixed with the delicate tracery of vine-leaf shadows and the soft, swaying gloom of the cedars.

"These bright spring mornings so often cloud over and lose their beauty," said Laura, "and then it is cold, for there is no warmth except just in the sunshine."

"Don't you think their uncertainty is partly what makes them so beautiful?" asked Percival.

It was two hours later: they had had their luncheon, and the three young people were talking in the drawing-room. Laura was tatting, Sissy, seated by her on a low ottoman, played with her scissors,

her cotton, her crochet-hook, and anything else on which she could lay her idle little hands. Laura regretted aloud that Willie had not come in. "I fear it is dull for you, Mr. Thorne," she said. "So stupid of Willie! He is about somewhere with papa, I suppose. If he had come in you could have smoked, and talked about dogs and horses, and played billiards and enjoyed yourselves. And now I am afraid you are bored."

"If that fear isn't the reflection of your own feelings, let me remind you that I'm not a smoker, and assure you that I am much happier here," said Thorne eagerly.

So he remained, idling over the books on the table, looking at the albums and talking. They happened to speak of some one who was fond of quoting.

"Heaven defend me from quotations!" exclaimed Percival. "Never quote."

"Oh, Percival! And you do it dreadfully."

"Sissy," he said in a tone of grave remonstrance, "how am I ever to shine in conversation if you make such remarks? I shall be put to silence."

"That would be a pity, wouldn't it?"

"I should think it would. Our deeds show what we are, our talk shows what we would be. Now, as my forte is rather precept than example—"

"There'll be nothing left if Sissy snubs you," said Laura. "Pray don't be snubbed. We are all attention."

"Never quote," he resumed, as calmly as if he had not been interrupted at all. "I saw the folly of it last week when I was away from Brackenhill. It was one of those glorious nights, and I was looking at the sky—a splendid sky—a vast space of white veined with blue, and behind it the moon steadily gliding, with two or three golden stars. Above that was a solemn height, and motionless wreaths of cloud flung across it here and there. Do you see it at all?"

"Very well indeed," Miss Falconer assured him.

"I stared at it and said nothing. Never call people to look at a sky or a picture, or anything that touches you, unless you are very sure of their stock of adjectives and your own. Else there is no know-

ing what may happen. She may be driven to say, 'Isn't it lovely?' And you in desperation may reply, 'Stunning!' or 'First-rate!' And then how can you ever respect yourselves or each other again? I pause for a reply."

"Don't pause. We seem to be advancing rather slowly."

"Presently up came the man I was with. 'What are you looking at? Oh, I say!' He had the grace to be silent for about five seconds. Then he burst out with, 'Look at that, now—isn't that Shelley exactly. You remember—you must remember.' I didn't remember, and it turned out that he didn't either, at least not well enough to recall the words. Off he rushed—turned up the gas—pulled down an armful of books: 'Here's Shelley—where is that bit, I wonder? Ah, I have it.' It was in 'The Cloud:' no doubt *you* know it?—

That orb'd maiden, with white fire laden,
Whom mortals call the moon,
Glides glimmering o'er my fleecelike floor.

But he wasn't satisfied. 'That's it,' he said, 'but that isn't all. There is a bit somewhere which gives that effect of an infinite multitude of little clouds. I don't believe it's Shelley at all. It's Wordsworth—no! Tennyson—Rossetti—somewhere in Browning, I think.' Down came six volumes of poems and *The Ring and the Book*. I had a couple to look through, so I found two or three of my favorite pieces and amused myself very happily. At last he lighted on what he wanted, and spouted it triumphantly:

A multitude
Of handbreadth cloudlets—

'That's it, you know,' he said. I agreed that that was it, and he went on—

— One vast rack
Of ripples infinite and—

'Oh!—why it's *black*!' He was a little disconcerted. 'That's your idea of an appropriate quotation, is it?' said I. 'And our sky is like luminous snow. Look there!' We both looked, and burst out laughing. It had grown gray while we were fitting it with a description!"

Percival had finished his story without

any change of tone, but toward the end his eyes were wandering out of the window. It seemed to him that it certainly was one of the Brackenhill carriages turning in at the gate, yet he feared to startle Sissy by the announcement till he should be perfectly sure. What could induce them to send the brougham? Some startling event, for it undoubtedly was the brougham.

"Don't I hear something driving in?" asked Laura.

"Yes. A visitor you will be surprised to see—as I am," he exclaimed. There was an impatient pull at the bell.—"Sissy, guess. But no, there is no time. Dear, it is the carriage from Brackenhill, and Horace is getting out."

Sissy made no reply, but sat, helpless as a scared child, gazing at the door. It was Miss Falconer who exclaimed, "*Horace!* Are you sure that it is really Mr. Horace Thorne?" and rushed to the window.

(There had been a little flirtation in old days, and Laura, though not seriously wounded, had a soft place still in her heart for him, and was apt to think of him by his Christian name.)

"Quite sure," said Percival.—"Sissy, listen to me. He is changed a good deal: be prepared—try not to look shocked. Dear, are you listening?"

"Yes." She lifted her eyes to him. They were full of terror and despair.

"What is the matter? Sissy, it is not so bad as that." He stopped and looked toward the opening door.

There was a little pause before Horace followed the servant who stood ready to announce him. Sissy got up and took hold of the back of the chair from which Laura had risen. She tried hard to be very calm. She fixed her eyes on a brilliant spot of red in the rug: it almost seemed to rise and burn beneath her gaze, but she was afraid to look away.

"Mr. Horace Thorne."

And Horace himself advanced, looking terribly worn and ill, but with a bright color on his cheeks and a glance, half defiant, half anxious, which seemed to say, "What do you think of me? I am

extremely well, and don't care what you think."

"Didn't expect to see me, did you?" he said, with a nervous laugh as he greeted Laura, who happened to stand nearest.

"That doesn't make us the less glad," she answered brightly.

He was hurriedly shaking hands with Percival.

"Glad to see you back again, old fellow!" said the latter.

But Horace had turned to Sissy with eager eyes: "My little Sissy! Why, what an age it is since I've seen you!" He had her cold little fingers in his clasp. "And what a lazy little woman, never to write!"

She looked up quickly as he stooped to kiss her, yet, though she looked up, her eyes avoided his, and she turned a little so that he kissed her cheek, and their lips did not meet. "Oh, I can't write letters," she said, "and auntie wrote, and Percival."

Horace drew back a little, and remembered what his mother had said: "No doubt Sissy will be the same to you *if your cousin will let her.*" He let her hand fall.

"How did you come?" said Percival.

"Yes, you forget we are all dying of curiosity," Miss Falconer chimed in. "How far have you travelled to-day? And are you quite worn out? What sort of passage did you have?"

"One question at a time. How far have I travelled to-day? Not very far: this morning from town—this afternoon from Brackenhill."

'But where was Aunt Harriet?' said Percival. "She could not have let you desert her so quickly, I know."

"She had taken the pony chaise, and left word for you that she should be home to dinner. So I asked the governor how he was, and he said, 'Quite well.' Then the governor asked me how I was, and I said, 'Quite well.' And after a little more conversation—about up to that sample—I said I thought I'd look you up."

"How nice of you!" exclaimed Laura. "But aren't you very tired?"

"Tired? No: what should make me tired? Driving nine miles in the brougham?—My good fellow," turning to Percival, "what are you shoving that easy-chair at me for? Keep it for yourself."

"May as well sit as stand," was the calm reply.

"Sit, then—put your feet up, and welcome—but let other people do as they like. I don't believe there was much the matter with me last autumn: at any rate, I'm all right now."

"That's well," said Percival. "When did you cross?"

"The night before last. We had a good passage."

Sissy had moved into the oriel window, and now spoke in a tremulous voice: "Do you ever cough now, Horace?"

"I don't know. Yes, now and then a little. Habit, you know: one doesn't get out of the way of a thing all at once. Mere trick, I believe: I must break myself of it."

"That's good news," said Percival.

Horace made his boast, as before, with the glance which wandered from face to face, hungry for confirmation of his assertion, yet laughing at the idea that there could be two opinions about such a self-evident fact. And all the time he looked a ghastly shadow of the bright Horace of a year before.

He had turned to Sissy as she spoke, and now stepped toward her. "*You* don't look very well," he said, commiserating her from the height of his own complete recovery. "What is the matter with you?"

She hung her head: "I don't know. I think it's the weather."

"The weather?" smiled Horace, as who should call attention to the mad fancies of invalids. "What is amiss with the weather, pray? Tolerable for foggy old England, isn't it?"

Sissy murmured some reply. Percival, who leant against the chimney-piece, looked up as she spoke, and the momentary glance photographed a little picture for ever on his memory. The cloud of which Laura had spoken had rolled upward, blotting the azure of the sky, and the great cedars were dark as

thunderstorms against the gray. In the melancholy oriel stood Horace and Sissy, if indeed they were Horace and Sissy,

and not the ghosts of their beautiful sunshiny selves, with the ghost of the sunshiny morning in the background. They



"HORACE TURNED TO SISSY WITH EAGER EYES."—Page 109.

looked at each other with strange eyes. What change had come over them during the last year? Horace had a con-

strained and watchful air, and Sissy shrank sadly from his look and touch. And these were the two who had been

like brother and sister together in glad old days at Brackenhill!

"Listen!" said Laura: "I hear papa and Willie."

And when the two came in, soon followed by Mrs. Falconer, there were such surprised exclamations, such questioning and such wonder on the part of the newcomers, such quick assertions of perfect health on Horace's part, that it did not signify whether Sissy talked or not.

Presently she stole across the room to Percival where he stood. "Have you spoken to William Falconer yet?" she asked in an eager whisper.

"Spoken to Falconer?"

"About the pony I am to ride—the pony from the rectory? Laura said he would go for it."

"But, my dear child, we don't want the pony now. What are you thinking of? Of course you will drive home in the brougham with Horace."

"No, no, I don't want to drive. I would rather ride with you—*much* rather, Percival." There were timid caresses in her voice, and almost tears.

"And I should like to ride with you," said he. "But we can't ask for the pony for a mere whim, though we might have done so when we were really in a difficulty."

"This morning," she pouted, hanging her pretty head, "you wanted our ride to go on for ever and ever, you told me. And now—"

"Now the sun has gone in, and the wind has got up, and the sky is gray, and Gypsy is lame, and, even if we had the pony, I dare say it would be a stupid little beast. No, no, Sissy, it is just as well as it is: it would not be perfect like this morning. We'll ride to-morrow, dear: you must drive home this afternoon. Why, what would Horace think?"

Percival considered the discussion closed, and was opening his lips to say something else when Sissy startled him: "I don't want to drive home with Horace."

He paused an instant, looking at her. "What do you mean?" he said gravely, but very gently. "He looks ill, poor fellow, but—"

"Oh, it isn't that," she exclaimed.

"Then what is it? Tell me quickly what you mean, Sissy."

"Nothing. Only I don't want to drive home with him. Oh, Percival, please don't ask me."

He looked perplexed, but after a moment he replied, "It isn't a question of asking: it seems to me you must."

"No, I needn't," said Sissy. "If you won't get me the pony I can stay here for the night. Laura will keep me: she said she would."

"Impossible!" Percival was growing stern. "Why, you told them you couldn't do it. It is out of the question."

Sissy stood with lips compressed, evidently unconvinced.

"Why don't you like driving home? What has Horace done?"

"Nothing."

"That is absurd," said Percival. "There must be some cause—"

"No, no! He hasn't done anything. Oh, Percival, be good to me!"

"My dear child, be reasonable."

"Very well, then: I will drive home, since you say I must. But you must drive too."

Percival spoke very gently, because he had determined that he *would* always speak gently to Sissy, and his smile was equally intentional: "You fly from one impossibility to another, dear. What is to become of the roan?"

"Let him stay here."

"You don't think what you are saying. They have promised to keep poor Gypsy, who can't go back to-day. I can't possibly ask them to keep the roan, who can."

Sissy was distressed, but still obstinate.

"Say that there is a meaning in this which you will explain to me when we reach Brackenhill," said Percival, "and of course something shall be done."

"No, no! Oh, why is Gypsy lame?"

"What's all the discussion about?" Mr. Falconer inquired. "Can't you get your own way, Miss Sissy? you seem trying very hard for it."

She looked up with a pretty, tearful brightness. "Oh, don't you think I ought to have it?" she exclaimed. "Please say you do."

"Of course you ought. Now is your time. Have your own way till you promise to honor and obey: that's only fair.—Wasn't that the bargain we made, my dear, in our old courting-days, before these young people were thought of?"

"Something like it," said his wife.

"It worked well, no doubt," said Percival, who stood erect and still, as if he were made of bronze.

"Very well," smiled Mrs. Falconer.

"Extremely well," said her husband. "Only, it was rather a long engagement, and—quite accidentally, of course—Lucy got so used to having her own way that she has never seemed able to get out of it. Otherwise, it worked remarkably well."

"I think we'll try it," said Sissy.

"It will be for Percival's good, too," said Mr. Falconer. "Don't they say a man isn't fit to command till he has learned to obey?"

While he spoke she contrived to whisper, "*If* you love me, Percival!"

"So be it," said young Thorne aloud.—"Mr. Falconer, I am so struck with your example that I am going to follow it. Sissy is very anxious that we should all be together to-day: she must drive home with Horace, and she can't bear the thought of my lonely ride."

"Leave your horse here," said Mr. Falconer.

"Exactly what I was going to ask your permission to do."

The matter was thus promptly settled, yet Sissy was hardly content. Percival smiled and talked, but there was yet a threatening gravity about his eyes.

The brougham came to the door, and the three drove off. The pleasure of being together had been secured with some difficulty, yet they scarcely seemed to appreciate each other's society. Horace leaned back, evidently tired, though he did his best to conceal the fact. Sissy cast timid glances, pleading for pardon, at Percival, who sat opposite with folded arms, shut lips and a line between his eyes. The world was very fair in its joy of returning spring, though the sky hung gray above it. But the beauty of green hedgerows and orchards pink

and white was lost on these three young people. Their hearts and brows were burdened so heavily that it was almost a wonder that the sleek chestnuts should whirl them so gayly along the road to Brackenhill. Something might have been done to lighten the load, no doubt, had the trio been able to make up their minds. Horace need not have uttered a word: he might have pulled a letter from his pocket which his hand instinctively sought, and he would have fronted the world once more with never a secret to hide. Sissy need only have opened her lips to let out a confused and hurried avowal, which sometimes seemed as if it must force its way in spite of her. But Percival, if he had a share of his own in this oppression, must have opened his heart to seek it, and might have been startled had a phantom taken shape and come forth from its inmost recesses to look him in the face.

"Here we are," said Horace with a yawn.

CHAPTER XXI.

RECONCILIATION.

AUNT MIDDLETON was on the steps, quivering from head to foot with impatient joy. These few moments of expectation, which seemed so intolerably long, were nevertheless the happiest that her boy's return could give her, for the sight of his face was the sight of a death-warrant. It was impossible to prepare her for the shock, and Horace saw her suddenly blanched cheeks, and met her with the more defiance.

It seemed as if the happy brightness of the morning could not belong to the day which closed so drearily. Everybody longed to hasten the lagging hours. Horace's talk was interrupted by dreadful fits of coughing, during which they all tried to look different ways and to seem unconscious of the terrible pause. Aunt Harriet pushed her chair farther back into the shadow, and sat over her knitting, dropping stitches and furtive tears. Sissy shrank from every one, as if she were some poor little wounded

creature whom the lightest touch would torture. It was not wonderful, perhaps, that she feared Percival's displeasure. Many people when they are put out show the depth of their feelings with tolerable accuracy. But Percival's darkly-expressive face intensified the meaning it had to convey. When he was put out he looked like a thundercloud. Nor did he weaken the effect of his expression by speech, and his politeness was terrible.

But Horace was not displeased with her, and when he coughed her eyes, as she turned them away, were full of sorrow. When he sat by the fireside she silently pushed him a footstool, and crept behind his chair to draw a curtain closer lest there should be a draught. She remembered every fancy he had about his tea. Yet she hardly spoke to him, nor did she touch him as she gave him his cup.

Mr. Thorne stood on the hearth-rug and surveyed the party. He was more grieved and anxious about his grandson than he would have owned even to himself.

"You must stay with us, Horace," he said abruptly. "That small bag wasn't all your luggage?"

(There was an unintentional sting in the invitation. He did not speak as if Horace had come *home*.)

"It is, though. Thank you," said the young man, rather stiffly, "I must be off to-morrow. I came over with my mother, and I don't care to leave her quite alone."

"Where is she?"

"We shall stay in town for a few weeks, I think."

"But of course you will come down to the wedding?" said Percival. "You are to be best man, you know."

"The wedding! pooh! That's five weeks hence—time for Sissy to change her mind before then," said the squire.—"Look here, Horace, I must have my little girl to myself for a few days before I lose her. I'll tell you what you shall do. Write and ask your mother to come at once and stay for a fortnight. No, your Aunt Harriet will write."

Mrs. Middleton was thunderstruck. She got up instantly, and went to the writing-table like one in a dream. For the next half hour she retired altogether from public life, and consumed many sheets of note-paper in fruitless endeavors to reconcile the terms of hospitality with those of truthfulness. Dr. Cumming was never so sure of the approaching end of all things as she was while she wrote the invitation. Godfrey asked *her* to Brackenhill! What could come next but doomsday?

Sissy, when she bade Percival good-night in the hall, said, "Please, don't be angry any longer."

"Am I angry?" he asked. "Well, perhaps I am. I am vexed and troubled. Why do you hide things from me, dear? Why can't you trust me? It is like the beginning of a shadow. What is that you sing sometimes?" And leaning against the wall he hummed softly,

The little rift within the lover's lute
Which by and by shall make—

She sprang to him, caught his hands, and held them: "Don't sing that! Don't sing that! Oh, Percival! Percival!"

"No," he said, "it won't be that, I hope and think. It won't be that, because I trust you. It is some foolish little secret, or it is some one else's secret. Not Horace's, is it?" he exclaimed suddenly "He has no right to burden—"

"Oh no! no!"

"Why not tell me?" said Percival. "If it is your own, it is some childish folly. I won't be stern. Do I look stern, Sissy? I'm not: you almost break my heart when you look at me with those great, frightened eyes of yours. I can't be very stern, I'm sure. And I won't laugh—there! People must do foolish things sometimes, or life wouldn't be endurable. I dare say you are foolish now and then: I hope so, for I know *I* am. What does it matter when I can trust my little wife? For you will never do anything of which I shall be ashamed. How can you ever find it in your heart to be afraid of me, Sissy—to stab me so? And why should you be afraid? I'm not

bad, but I wish my soul were as sweet and clear as yours. Tell me, dear, and if I *do* smile, it will be to think that such a trouble could weigh so heavily."

Till he paused she had not looked up at him. Then she did: "Oh, Percival, you are good! But I have nothing to tell you, really."

He shook his head: "Is that all the answer I am to have?"

"No," she said, "not all." And she suddenly threw her arms about his neck

and drew his dark face down and kissed him. No words could have moved him as did the mute appeal of those little clinging hands and kissing lips. Displeasure vanished like a cloud. She laughed, and shut his eyes with sweet caresses and kissed his mouth to silence. And an old wideawake of the squire's, set jauntily askew on a hat-peg just above them, looked down and seemed to bless the baseless reconciliation.



CHAPTER XXII.

A THORN IN THE FLESH.



"I WOULD cheerfully," said Mrs. Middleton to Percival a few days later, "very cheerfully, give you five pounds—now, this minute—if you could tell me how to say something *politely* to Mrs. James."

"Some one particular thing?" the young man replied from the depths of his easy-chair. "Let me hear what it is.

Never earned five pounds in my life: it would be a new sensation.—I'll buy you something with it, Sissy—shall I? Eh?—Oh, she's gone!"

"It isn't earned yet," said Aunt Harriet dryly, "and I don't think it will be easy."

"You excite my curiosity. What is it?"

"Well! next time Mrs. James and I have a talk how am I to say—quite civilly and in a ladylike way—'That is the biggest fib I have heard since the one you told at breakfast'? Now, Percival!"

"Adieu, all hopes of five pounds!" said Percival. "You must say it right out, or she wouldn't see it."

"And then it could hardly be civil."

"What *is* the latest novelty, by the way?" he asked after a pause.

"Oh, I don't know. That the Benhams are related to Sir Walter Courtenay of Langley Priors: I don't think there has been one since that. I like her audacity. What will the woman say next?"

"Can't tell," said Percival: "her imagination far outsoars mine."

"Well, I never saw much of her before, but I don't think she used to be as bad as this," fumed Aunt Harriet. "If only she wouldn't kiss me! And the fuss she makes with Godfrey—calling him 'papa!' too, when she wants to be so lively and insinuating. It's sickening! She makes me think of those nasty boa creatures, licking you all over before they gulp you down! I can't believe she's Horace's mother—I really can't. I don't feel as if she could be."

"It does seem absurd," he replied. "Do you think he was changed at nurse? I don't see how it could be managed otherwise," he mused, frowning in the effort to construct a theory. "I doubt if Mrs. James could be changed in any way; and even with Horace there are difficulties—"

The distant sound of a harsh, high voice made Mrs. Middleton leap to her feet: "Mercy on us! here she comes! I thought she was safe in her room for an hour at least."

"I think," said Percival in his very softest tone, "that that is the parrot screeching in the library."

"Oh, of course!" Aunt Harriet sank back relieved, only to exclaim the next moment, "Percival, the parrot doesn't wear a silk dress."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "it *is* Mrs. James!" and was out of the window and on the terrace in a moment.

She came in with a rustling sweep of drapery and what was a big, demonstrative woman's notion of a gliding walk.

"Oh, here is Aunt Harriet!" she exclaimed. "I asked Sissy where you were, just now, and she told me she thought you were here."

"I am here," said Mrs. Middleton. (Brevity is the soul of wit, they say, so it may be presumed this speech was witty. At any rate, it tripped the conversation up as a witty remark will occasionally do.)

There was a little pause before Mrs.

James spoke again: "*Dear* Aunt Harriet, busy as ever, knitting away." She sat down on the sofa, and it creaked a little: her stiff black silk, with its violet satin trimming, swept over Mrs. Middleton's lap. The little, delicately-apparelled old lady was engulfed and fondled.

Mrs. James Thorne was fifty-four. She called herself forty-three, and always spoke as if she had been very young indeed at the time of her marriage, six-and-twenty years before: "A mere chit—just out of the schoolroom. I ought to have been in it a good deal longer, I'm afraid, so learned as people are now-a-days. But poor dear papa couldn't say 'No' when his little girl coaxed him to let her have a pony. And the hounds met close by, you know, and then—why then,

The old, old story was told again,

as that dear, sweet—what's her name? Floribel?—Claribel says. Very naughty, no doubt, but young people will be young people, won't they?"

She smilingly alluded to herself in this style before the squire on one occasion. "Ah, yes!" he said without a quiver of voice or muscle, though he could perfectly recall the big young woman of eight-and-twenty as he spoke. "Goodish-sized pony, wasn't it? I remember it."

She thought it was.

"Yes, yes," he repeated, apparently meditating, "nice pony." He seemed to call the points of the imaginary animal to remembrance. "Didn't your father get him from Jack Lawson?" he asked suddenly: "you remember Jack Lawson?"

(Rumor had linked Mr. Lawson's name with Miss Benham's from one end of the county to the other while James Thorne was still a white-faced little schoolboy.)

"Oh *yes*," she said, looking him full in the face: "I recollect him, of course. Little black man, wasn't he?" This was very creditable—Mr. Jack Lawson having been big and sandy-haired.

Approval dawned in the squire's eyes. "Exactly!" he said, and added thoughtfully, "a good memory is one of the

greatest of blessings when one is advancing in years."

She was rather perplexed.

Mrs. James was not a bad-looking woman. From her girlhood onward she had always been somewhat too high-colored and strongly built for beauty, but her features were regular and her figure good. She might have made a grand Amazon, but her affectation of juvenility, her sentimental reminiscences and insinuating smiles, were hideously at variance with her masculine appearance. "Hunting Harry," as Miss Harriet Benham had been called of old, hunted now with playful glances and little sighing allusions to her youth, as if she missed it like a friend she had just lost.

Percival hated her, and behaved to her with stately courtesy. "She has such a fearful voice," he said one day to Sissy.

"It isn't pleasant," said Sissy, stooping over him as he sat and putting some violets in his coat. "Yours is."

"I should think hers *wasn't* pleasant. If they were going to hang me, and she had to pronounce sentence—which she would do with great pleasure—I think I should ask to be executed at once, and let her rasp it out at her leisure when I was beyond its reach."

"You always speak so softly and lazily when she is near," said Sissy. "I think you aggravate her."

"Do you really?" Percival was so pleased that he sat up. "Dear me! If I got some of Aunt Harriet's voice-jubes, and sucked one between every sentence, do you think it might make me more mellifluous still?"

"Well, it would make you slower," said Sissy: "I think you would never leave off talking to her then."

"There's something in that," said Percival, sinking back. "Better leave well alone, perhaps."

"After all, her voice isn't her fault," Sissy suggested.

"It's one of them. She *could* hold her tongue."

"Isn't that rather hard? Don't be an unkind boy."

"It *is* hard," he allowed. "People shouldn't be judged by voices or noses

or complexions, or such things, of course. | like to be unjust to a woman because
Take hair, for instance. I should not | her hair was pale drab, or because it



"SHALL WE GO TO LUNCHEON?"—Page 119.

turned gray at twenty-five, or because it | don't think our colored brothers happy
was such a minute wisp that one small | in their style of hair, but I don't blame
hair-pin would restrain the whole. I | them for it. But I am not superior to all

prejudices: I admit it frankly, though with sorrow. I object strongly to any one in whose hair I detect a glowing shade of purple. Just get Mrs. James between you and the light—"

But we have left Mrs. Thorne seated on the sofa by Aunt Harriet. "You don't mind my calling you Aunt Harriet, do you?" she says sweetly. "Perhaps I ought to say Mrs. Middleton, but didn't my poor dear James always call you Aunt Harriet? And my own name, too! I always feel so fond of my namesakes, as if they belonged to me, somehow. Don't you?"

"I never had much to do with any namesakes of mine, except one maid," says the old lady reflectively; "and she had such dreadful warts on her hands! But I was able to give her the best of characters, thank Goodness!"

"How droll you are!" Mrs. James replies, with her head on one side. She holds a small portrait a long way off, and lifts a gold-rimmed glass to examine it.

"What have you got there?" Aunt Harriet inquires.

Mrs. James sighs, and turns the picture a little toward her companion, who puts on her spectacles and peers curiously at it. It is a painting on ivory of Maurice Thorne, the squire's favorite son, who was drowned so many years ago.

"Good gracious! Maurice's miniature out of the library!—My dear Mrs. James, excuse me, but Godfrey never allows that to be touched."

"Oh, he wouldn't mind My having it for a few moments, just to recall old days. He would understand My feelings, I am sure. Don't be afraid, dear Aunt Harriet: if he should come in I will take all the blame. I will say, 'The fault is mine, papa, Entirely Mine—you'll forgive me, won't you?' I assure you, Aunt Harriet, he sha'n't scold you: I will tell him you warned me, but that I was so wilful, and felt so sure he would understand my interest in poor dear Maurice."

"Godfrey will not scold me: I am not afraid," says the old lady, with quivering emphasis. She is almost boiling over with suppressed indignation at the idea of Mrs.

James defending her from her brother. Her knitting progresses in a jerky manner, and she has not discovered that she has dropped a stitch in the last row. "It would be odd if Godfrey and I didn't understand each other. And you must pardon me, but I don't quite see your particular interest in Maurice."

"In poor dear Maurice?" Mrs. James repeats, as if Mrs. Middleton had forgotten the proper adjectives for any one who happened to be dead, and she would delicately suggest them. "You don't see my interest in him? How strange! I always thought it so true what some one says, somewhere, you know, that a woman never feels quite the same toward a man who . . . even if she . . . Oh, I can't remember exactly how it goes, but it isn't out of my own head. I saw it somewhere, and I said 'How very true!' One must feel a *little* differently toward him, I think, though one cannot feel quite as *he* would wish."

Mrs. Middleton stares blankly at her visitor. Astonishment and disgust have risen to such a height within her that, unable to find fitting expression in her face, they find none at all. What does this woman mean? That Maurice—*Maurice*— Oh, it is too much! ("My dear," she said afterward, "if I had spoken I must have screamed at her!")

Mrs. James, still with the portrait in her hand, sighs, half smiles and puts up her eyeglass for another survey. "So like!" she murmurs. Handsome Maurice, trim and neat in the fashion of thirty years ago, looks out of the miniature frame with wide clear eyes and proudly-curved mouth. One might fancy an expression of scornful appeal on the delicately-painted features, as if he saw the coarsely-complexioned, middle-aged face leaning over him, and exclaimed, "Mate *me* with *her*!" She turns the bright young fellow a little more to the light, and dusts him pensively with her lace-edged handkerchief.

"Curious!" she says. "Of course poor dear Maurice was *handsomer*—there could be no doubt of that."

"Handsomer than whom?" Aunt Harriet is growing desperate.

"Handsome than poor dear James. I've got *him* in a brooch. It must have been done when he was about the same age, I should think."

"I dare say I'm a stupid old woman," says Aunt Harriet, who has compressed a multitude of mistakes into a row or two of her work, and is going fiercely on, "but I don't quite see *what* was curious. One of them was pretty sure to be handsomer than the other, unless they were twins and you couldn't tell which was which."

"Dear Aunt Harriet! how practical she is!" Mrs. James murmurs in a fondly patronizing voice. "No, I was thinking how curious it is that

Love will still be lord of all,

as they say. Poor dear Maurice! handsomer, older (and that is always a charm when one is *very* young, isn't it?), and the heir too. And yet it was poor dear James who was to be my fate!"

"Ah, I suppose it was obliged to be James," says Mrs. Middleton vaguely. Her companion darts a keen glance at her, as if suspecting a hidden sarcasm, but the old lady is examining her knitting with newly-aroused curiosity, and seems startled and innocent. Mrs. James covers half Maurice's face with her hand and gazes at the forehead, partly shaded with silky dark hair.

"Doesn't it remind you a little of our dear Sissy?" she says.

"Sissy! Why should it be like Sissy? Why, there wasn't a drop of the same blood in their veins!"

"It reminds me of her," Mrs. James persists. "Aunt Harriet, do you know I think the dear child is throwing herself away? Surely she might have done much better."

"It's rather late now," says Aunt Harriet.

"*With* her beauty *and* her money, and he with no fortune, no expectations, and nothing to look at. Do you recollect Sarah Percival, ages ago, in her queer bonnets, singing out of a great hymn-book in the rectory pew? What poor Alfred could see in her I never could imagine. Such a tawny, unformed, mu-

latto sort of a girl! And Percival *is* a Percival, there's no doubt of that. Such a complexion, and that unfortunate curliness! It makes one think there must be some negro blood somewhere."

Percival, with his clear olive skin, his firmly-set lips, his grave eyes and the smooth curves of hair about his forehead,—Percival like a negro! Percival, who carried himself so proudly, and who always had an indescribable air, as if he had just stepped out of some romance or poem!

Mrs. Middleton cannot help laughing. "I don't see it," she says; "and I saw Sarah Percival two or three times, and thought her a handsome girl."

"So she was," says the squire, opening the door. "What's the joke?" For Mrs. Middleton is laughing still. She has given her suppressed emotions the rein, and relieves them in this manner, while her companion sits by her, amazed and half offended at the outburst. She cannot answer for a moment, and meanwhile Mr. Thorne has taken the miniature from Mrs. James in a matter-of-fact way, which does not admit of the threatened apology.

Mrs. Middleton finds breath to explain: "It's nothing, Godfrey. Only Mrs. James thinks Percival like a negro."

"Now, really, Aunt Harriet, it is too bad," the lady interposes: "you shouldn't repeat my little random speeches."

"Too bad, Harriet!" says her brother. "Don't you see that it is impossible"—he looks at the portrait as he speaks—"that Mrs. James should appreciate my favorites?—Shall we go to luncheon?" He offers his arm to his daughter-in-law. She takes it with a sweet smile, and turns away her head for a moment with a face like a thunder-cloud.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHAT IS LOVE?

"I'm glad Mrs. James isn't *my* mother," said Sissy confidentially to Percival.

"So am I," he replied dryly. "I shouldn't care to have to emigrate immediately after our marriage."

"She does crush me so when she kisses me. She made quite an impression of her malachite brooch on my face this morning. It hurt so: is it gone?"

She turned a cheek like a delicate rose-leaf to the light for his inspection. "Horace seems very fond of her, doesn't he?" she went on.

"They watch each other as if each played cat to the other's mouse," Percival replied. "If that is being very fond, never were couple so attached before."

"Percival," Sissy hesitated, "I don't think she always tells the truth."

"What barefaced falsehood has forced you to see that?"

"This morning she came in and held out a letter, and when she saw me she said to him, 'From your aunt Matilda, my dear.' That's her sister, you know. But once, a long while ago, Horace had a letter from Miss Benham on his birthday, and we laughed at it, for it was shaky and just as if she had scratched it with a pin; and this was great round writing, like a boy's, and as thick—oh, ever so thick!"

"Perhaps Miss Benham has taken to black her letters with a brush," Percival suggested.

"And Horace took it and got quite pink."

"Perhaps he is very fond of his aunt Matilda too. Sissy, should you mind very much if I went away for a few days?"

"Went away? why?"

"I think it would be best. I shouldn't like to have any quarrel or unpleasantness, just now especially. Horace and I don't get on quite so well as we used, dear. I don't think it is his doing altogether: I think Mrs. James has something to answer for. Or—who knows?—it might be the letter from Aunt Matilda put him out a little."

She looked doubtfully up at him. "But must you go?" she said. "Horace won't stay very long."

"That is why I must, I think. We don't want him to get into trouble, do we? My grandfather would take my part, right or wrong, and we should break Aunt Harriet's heart."

"Yes, go," hanging her head sadly.

"It will only be for a few days. Don't look so mournful: you'll have enough of me soon, believe me."

"I wish I were sure of that," she answered in an eager whisper.

"Wish you were sure you would be tired of me one of these days? Well, that's a droll wish, you strange child. Look up, and tell me what you mean by it."

"I mean I want all of you, I think;" and she laid her head on his shoulder.

Percival was silent for a moment. She was his darling, his pride. At a word, a glance, he would have laid down his life for her. But as she spoke it flashed upon him that she possessed but a very small portion of that life. What multitudes of thoughts, fancies, longings, memories had gone to make up the five-and-twenty years of his existence! Some of them were dim floating phantoms, which would be transformed if they were clothed in any words whatever. And there were political day-dreams, of Reform (general, and with a big R), and dreams of something beyond politics—of the future of Humanity (with a big H). How could he explain these to Sissy? She would be bewildered, if indeed her soul, fenced and pure, did not shrink from some of his unfettered aspirations after good. She knew a little of the ordinary level of his life, but he knew of thoughts which had risen high above it, when his soul was drawn like a mighty tide Godward, and of thoughts which had sunk far below it. Could he have told her of the first, she would have thought him a miracle of perfection. Could he have told her of the last, the red which mounted to his brow would have stained her whiteness with shame. In neither case would she have better understood him—rather, fatally misunderstood him. If he could not truly possess those lofty impulses, neither was he truly possessed by the lower ones. Must it always be so between man and woman? he wondered, as he stood with his arm about Sissy. Or was the fault in her or in himself? Did he even know himself? What dim abysses of thought would open in his mind sometimes as he lay in wakeful

midnight dreams! What unexpected fancies would spring up and blossom in his brain! Could one human being ever know another? Hardly; but then what was love? Perhaps only a germ of divination here, which should ripen into knowledge in a far-off eternity. He could fancy Judith Lisle, for instance, reading his soul in some new and more transparent life, and if it were a purer soul, which had no need to flinch, he thought it would be a pleasant thing to be penetrated by that quiet gaze. Man's isolation here might be unavoidable, but something in the shadowy loneliness of thought rather reminded him of the dusky gloom in which a cuttlefish shrouds himself from unwelcome pursuers. He liked to fancy Judith— *Judith!* and all the while his arm was round Sissy's waist!

"My dear child," he said hurriedly, "take the best of me: you don't want all. You looked charming the other night in those pearls my grandfather gave you. All the better that you were content with the pearls, and did not insist on taking the fish and the shells in your pocket."

She laughed, drawing closer to him. Then she smiled, then she sighed: "Give me just what you like, Percival: it will always be more than all the rest of the world put together."

He kissed her. "What have I done to deserve all this?" he said. And he went away, musing, to announce his approaching departure to his grandfather.

He had only hinted at the cause in his talk with Sissy. He had had something very like a quarrel with his cousin that morning. Horace, lying back in an easy-chair, had attacked him as he stood in his favorite attitude on the rug reading the *Times*. He had answered lightly at first, refolding his paper and beginning a fresh column; but Horace had persisted in pouring forth fresh reproaches, interrupted from time to time by his terrible fits of coughing. Those coughing fits were more eloquent than words could have been. Percival, glancing at him, thought that he had never before realized the full significance of the mediæval "Dances of Death." It would hardly have seemed strange or

unnatural had he seen a skeleton leaning, with dry arms folded, on the back of the chair in which Horace lay disputing about his rights and wrongs. He could even fancy how the spectre, before putting out its bony hand, would look at him over his cousin's head, as much as to say, "You and I understand all about it, don't we? But won't he be surprised when I— Eh?" And without any such ghastly imaginings the contrast between the two young men was terrible enough. Percival could see it, for he had turned round and stood nearly facing the mirror, where his reflection confronted him, erect, strong, and with a pleasantly defiant look of health and well-being. Though he was always pale rather than otherwise, there was a slight color on his cheek—not a mere surface tint, but showing that the blood coursed warmly beneath the olive skin. His lips were red, his glance was bright, as if he were darkly glowing with abundant life. And Horace lay back in his chair, frail, slim and bloodless, chafing his transparent hands. He had a beauty of his own: his eyes were almost painfully brilliant, and two spots of vivid pink flushed the whiteness of his face. How could Percival do anything but listen to him with the gentlest patience? Yet he was sorely tried. It is not pleasant to be taxed with wronging a man behind his back, and playing Jacob's part, especially when poor Esau has not been hunting and enjoying himself, but was sent to the south of France for a last chance.

"Don't let us quarrel, Horace," Percival had said. "Yes, what you say is true enough. When I came here first, five or six years ago, many a fellow in your position would have made himself uncommonly disagreeable, and you didn't. You met me almost like a brother. You may be sure I shall remember that."

"I don't want your memory," sneered Horace from his chair: "I want justice."

"Be just, then," Percival replied, with as it were a hint of inflexibility in his tone. "Is it not right and natural that I should be often at Brackenhill during this last winter, Sissy being to me—what she is?"

"Oh, it was all Sissy, no doubt," said Horace; and then there was a prolonged pause. Percival stood by, watching the slender frame shaken by the terrible cough. He had an absurd feeling, as if he were ashamed of himself, when he saw Horace struggling with it, and then leaning back utterly spent and feeble, with the painful flush brighter than ever on his cheeks. It seemed to him that he, being so strong and well, ought to have borne the pain, instead of the poor fellow who looked up after a moment, took his handkerchief from his lips, and tried to go on.

"This was my home once," Horace said: "you can't deny it. And now I haven't a home, I suppose, for God knows this is none. My grandfather treats me like a visitor, and fixes the length of my stay. Sissy couldn't so much as say she was glad to see me when we met. Aunt Harriet—"

"Nonsense!" said Percival. "Why, you are the apple of her eye!"

"Do you think I can't see the difference?" Horace demanded. "And I know who has done it all behind my back. Well, Percival, I suppose you'll enjoy it: I shouldn't."

"Horace, listen to me. I can't stand this." He felt, as he spoke, as if it were rather mean to overpower his cousin's feeble utterance with his strong voice. "Of course I have been here oftener of late: it was only natural. But as to my attempting to supplant you, or doing anything behind your back that I wouldn't have done with you here, you know perfectly well it isn't true; or you would know if you were more yourself."

"Stop!" said Horace as the other turned away. "If it isn't true, prove it."

"Prove it?" said Percival, with his head high in the air.

"Say, once and for all, that you are not trying for Brackenhill. Say you'll not take it even if he offers to leave it to you: he has no right. Of course if I died, that would be another thing. But swear you'll not have it while I live."

Percival spoke instinctively: "No, I'll not swear either way."

"Then we'll fight it out," said the fee-

ble voice from the arm-chair—"to the bitter end, as they are so fond of saying now."

"Fight? nonsense!" Percival answered. "I'm not going to fight you, my dear fellow, nor you me. You see everything awry to-day. I say I won't make any promises. I hate promises—attempts to make a moment eternal, bonds which are never needed unless they chafe. So I won't pledge myself to anything definite, and you instantly take it for granted that I am pledged to cheat you."

"Put all that stuff about promises into a magazine article: I needn't read it," said Horace, aiming at a cool and scornful demeanor. "I only want to know what you mean."

"I have told you."

"Percival, it is my right, and you know it," the invalid exclaimed. For a moment Percival almost hesitated. The excessive anxiety which was visible on his cousin's face surprised him, and touched him with the kind of pity which makes a man's heart ache, while he can hardly repress a smile. Here was this poor dying fellow in agonies about his inheritance, when in all probability his grandfather would outlive him. It was as if a prisoner, ordered out for execution, should be anxious about having a particular dinner awaiting him done to a turn, in case a reprieve should arrive on the scaffold. Why not humor the sick man in his whim? No: he hated promises. His prudence forbade him to set foot in a labyrinth of which he had not the clew.

"It is my right," Horace repeated. "And I have my grandfather's word."

"You have his word?"

"Yes: on one condition, that is."

"What condition? No, I have no business to ask that. If you have kept it—"

"No fear of my not keeping it," said Horace with something like triumph in his eyes.

"If you have his word, what more can you want?"

"You know you can turn him round your finger," Horace answered. "Well, you must do your worst. From this time

forward I shall know what I have to expect. We'll fight it out."

"No, we won't do anything of the kind."

"Which means," said Horace, "that I shall fight openly, and you'll fight with professions of friendship. As you please."

It would have been nearly impossible not to think that these terrible coughing fits came at very convenient times. But it was quite impossible not to perceive their painful reality. Percival was silenced again.

"Most likely you'll win: I'd advise any one to back you," said Horace hoarsely. There was something grotesque and almost terrible in the feeble obstinacy which clung ever to the one thought. "Only, you know now that, winning or losing, you have nothing to expect from me. You quite understand?" His eyes glittered as he looked up at his cousin. He seemed determined to fix a quarrel on him. "You won't expect any further friendship."

Percival had been gazing thoughtfully into the mirror again until Horace was able to speak. Perhaps that accounted for the quiet answer: "We won't discuss our friendship now. I quite understand that I am to expect nothing but high tragedy till further notice: I prefer something not quite so much beyond me for my every-day life; so I think I'll say good-bye for the present."

"You may sneer," said Horace, "but I mean what I say."

"So do I," said Percival. "I very decidedly mean that it takes two to make a quarrel, and I am not going to be one of them. Here! do you care to look at the paper?" And laying it down by his cousin's side, he went off, whistling softly to himself, and leaving Horace to look sideways at the *Times* as if it were the deadliest of insults.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GODFREY HAMMOND ON BIRD-CATCHING.

AN evening or two later Percival walked into Godfrey Hammond's room, to its owner's great surprise. "I thought you were at Brackenhill," he said.

"So I was till Saturday."

"Come up to get things ready?"

"Come up for a little peace, and to leave a little peace there. Mrs. James is too fond of me."

"What?" said Hammond.

"Oh, it's all right," Percival replied: "she is much too fond of me to my face. But she makes it all even when my back is turned."

"So you have left her in possession?"

"Well, I came to the conclusion that the same house couldn't hold us, unless it were a good many sizes bigger than Brackenhill. And I couldn't take her by the shoulders and turn her out of it, as it wasn't mine."

"H'm," said Godfrey. "How does she get on with the squire?"

"Charmingly. He sees right through her, and she is blissfully unconscious of it."

"And what is she like to look at?" said Hammond. "I don't believe I've seen her for twenty years. Hunting Harry, as we called her, used to be handsome—for those who liked the sort."

Percival shrugged his shoulders: "Well, for a woman of her age, she is handsome now—for those who like the sort. Only she comes marching along in a 'Who-comes-here?—A-grenadier' fashion, and when the story ought to go on with a good wholesome pot of beer, or something equally matter of fact, you get a dose of stale rose-water sentiment in a rasping voice."

"And is she very fond of the squire?"

Percival nodded: "Fonder than she is of me, and that's saying a good deal. As complimentary as—as—what shall I say?—as a testimonial to some one you never want to see again."

"Ought not you to be looking after things a little?"

The young man smiled. "Surely, in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird," he said.

"That's Solomon, isn't it? Well, I dare say it may be true enough—of birds. I never tried it, but I can fancy a knowing old bird watching the process of spreading the net with lively interest, and its head very much on one side,

and then ungratefully flying off to an unattainable tree. But if he meant it for men, I deny it utterly. It is just the net that a man sees that he walks straight into. He can't leave it alone and go away. He must show every one how plainly he sees it, and how perfectly he understands the principle on which the snare is arranged, and how very much closer he can venture in safety than any one else could. In fact, there is really *no* danger for him. And the next thing you know, there he is, right in the middle of it, explaining that he always meant to walk into it and get caught one of these fine days."

"Very true, I dare say," said Percival. "But I don't think Mrs. James will do much with my grandfather. Nor do I see that Horace and I need clash in any way."

"No, I suppose not," said Godfrey. He thought of Horace's father dying twenty years earlier, as Horace was dying now. "I suppose not," he repeated. "He'll go abroad again before the winter comes, won't he?"

Percival started when he saw the direction Hammond's thoughts had taken: "Yes—I hope so—that is—if—" He stopped abruptly.

"Ah, you think he'll be past that? Ever see any one in a decline before?"

The other shook his head.

"Probably you think him in more immediate danger than he really is. Poor Jim was a long while ill, I remember." He rubbed his hard white hands together as he spoke, and gazed at his great signet-ring as if all the past lay hidden beneath its onyx surface.

"Godfrey," said Percival abruptly, "I came away partly because of Horace. He wants to quarrel with me: he fancies I'm trying to supplant him. His thoughts are terribly set on Brackenhill, poor fellow! though what he can want with Brackenhill I hardly know. There's something ghastly in it to me, since it can only be for himself. He wanted me to swear I wouldn't take it while he lived. I hope I wasn't cruel to deny the poor fellow his fancy—if it really *was* a fancy, and not an excuse

for a quarrel. But I hate promises I can't understand. Of course my grandfather would leave it to him: that was settled ages ago. I won't do anything unfair—he ought to know that—but why am I to pledge myself in the dark?"

"Mrs. James isn't dying, if Horace is, poor fellow!" said Godfrey. "Perhaps she has some little scheme. Of course you were right enough, Percival: you always were a prudent young man."

Percival felt as if he colored. He passed his hand quickly over his face: "I'm not so sure of that."

"Not like Horace," Godfrey went on. "He narrowly escaped getting into the squire's black books last year—irretrievably too—at the agricultural show. How time goes! We shall have it here again directly."

"What did he do?"

"It was those Blake girls. The squire thought there was something between him and Addie, and he vowed he wouldn't have one of them at Brackenhill: he'd make it into an asylum for idiots sooner. I hardly think he'd have pardoned *you*, Percival, if you had fallen in love with Lottie just then."

"There was no fear."

"So it seems. I don't know why he should have been so furious, either: the Blakes were better than the Benhams. But he was. I think he threatened Master Horace, and then, as it happened, they went away; so it blew over. Where are they now?"

"Lottie and her mother are abroad somewhere: I'm sure I don't know where. Addie is with that half-brother of hers, who got most of the money."

"Addie was worth all the others put together," said Godfrey.

Percival shook his head. That glow of pity and brotherly sympathy which was kindled in his heart on the hillside a year before had not died out. "I like Lottie best," he said simply as he rose to go.

Godfrey went out with him, asking about Mrs. Middleton and Sissy. At the head of the stairs he paused: "Talking of old friends, did you hear that Miss Lisle's engagement was off?"

Percival was a couple of steps below

him. He flung his head back a little defiantly: "Why, yes—months ago."

"Ah, of course." Godfrey lowered his voice. "Young Marchmont was a lucky fellow to get his dismissal."

"I don't see his luck. Rather the other way."

"You haven't looked at this evening's paper?"

"No. What has young Marchmont got?"

"Nothing. But Lisle's bank has smashed, and they say he isn't to be found."

"My God!" cried Percival, "you don't mean that?"

Hammond nodded: "Bolted. Marchmont has had a lucky escape. I suppose it's an awful crash."

"And Judith—Miss Lisle—how will she bear it? If I were Marchmont—if I'd ever loved a girl, I'd give the world to have the right to stand by her at such a time as that."

"Don Quixote! I won't betray you to St. Cecilia," Hammond laughed a little enviously. "Why you are a lucky fellow too, Percival. Two or three years ago, before you came of age, he was your guardian, wasn't he? Much you'd have seen of your money if the smash had come then! I say, take care there!"

The young man, who was going down stairs in a bewildered way, like one in a dream, stumbled and caught at the rail: "Confound it, Godfrey! you've got a loose stair-rod, or something. Nearly broke my neck." He recovered himself a little. "I can't believe it yet. Are you *sure* it's true? That he has *gone*?"

"I'm afraid there's no doubt," said Hammond.

"And left her to face it all? Well, he was my father's friend, but—" and Percival used some language which would not have been suitable for a young ladies' school. It might even have been thought a shade too forcible for a religious paper in a passion.

CHAPTER XXV.

OF A HERMIT CRAB.

Connaissez-vous une bête qu'on nomme bernard l'ermite? C'est une très-petit homard, gros comme

une sauterelle, que a une queue sans écailles Il prend la coquille qui convient à sa queue, l'y fourre, et se promène ainsi au bord de la mer. Hier j'en ai trouvé un dont j'ai cassé la coquille très-proprement sans écraser l'animal puis je l'ai mis dans un plat d'eau de mer. Il y faisait la plus piteuse mine."—PROSPER MÉRIMÉE: *Lettres à une Inconnue*.

It was a wonderful thing for Percival Thorne to be seen tearing along a railway-platform in furious haste. He so prided himself on never being in a hurry that he was conscious of a painful loss of dignity and self-respect on such an occasion. But the afternoon after his conversation with Godfrey Hammond he had dashed into the station, taken a ticket for Fordborough, and leapt into the nearest carriage without a glance at its occupant.

The train puffed slowly off. Even over London the May sunlight hung like a golden glory, and as they glided out of the station and quickened their pace through green fields the sky was the deepest, purest blue. Percival did not see it. He was still discomposed, feeling in his pockets to see what he had and what he had left behind (as people always do when they jump in in a hurry), and a little out of breath still. Presently he crossed his legs with a sigh of relief. After which he took off his hat, pushed back his hair and felt better.

Then the lady, who was dressed in black and sat in the farthest corner, put up her veil, leaned forward and said "Percival!"

"Why, Addie, I didn't know you!" He moved to the seat opposite hers, and as their hands met he thought of that evening in Langley Wood.

"I had the advantage of leisure," smiled Addie. "I don't suppose I should have been undetected long."

"You are going down to Fordborough?"

"Yes. We hope to let our house there, and I am going down to make some final arrangements and to bring a few things away."

"Rather a dreary errand. You don't think of living at Fordborough any more, then?"

"Not at present. I hope we shall some day."

In Percival's state of mind it was pleasanter to question than to be questioned.

So he proceeded to ascertain that she was with Oliver, as he had supposed, and that Oliver was a dear, good, darling fellow—that they were staying at a little seaside village, and that Oliver was thinking about a yacht.

But she interrupted his questions at last. "And how does the world treat you?" she asked.

"Very much as I deserve," was the brief reply. "So I must not complain, must I?"

"I don't know," said Addie. "I like to be treated a little better than I deserve. But I don't think you ought to complain: I may congratulate you, mayn't I? I have never seen you since I heard— Is it to be soon?"

"In less than a month now," he answered with his pleasant smile.

"I saw Miss Langton at the agricultural show last year," said Addie. "I congratulate you with all my heart, for I thought she looked charming." Percival thanked her with a slight inclination of his head and a well-pleased glance. "I suppose you are going to Brackenhill now? Your errand ought to be a pleasanter one than mine."

"My errand is on a business matter, and might be pleasanter than it is." There was a touch of bitterness in his tone.

"I'm sorry," said Addie, looking at him with friendly anxiety in her eyes. "I hope it isn't anything serious."

"Serious? oh no! Did you ever read about Sinbad the Sailor?"

"A long time ago," she said with a wondering smile.

"I'm Sinbad," said Percival calmly. "People say that everybody has a skeleton in a closet. I don't know what yours may be like"—a flash of expression passed across Addie's face—"as pleasant as a skeleton can be, I hope: mine is the Old Man of the Sea."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. I'm going down now expressly to invite him to get up on my shoulders."

"Perhaps he won't," in an encouraging tone.

"Heaven help me if he doesn't!" ex-

claimed Percival. "What would become of me? But he will."

"Are you quite sure that you know what you really want?" Addie inquired with a smile.

"Perhaps not. And in these days of restoring and beautifying everybody's memory, I feel bound to observe that I have studied the Old Man of the Sea, and there is much to be said for him."

"Well, I hope you may enjoy carrying him more than you expect to do," said Addie. Then she hesitated, consulted her watch, looked out of the window, buttoned and unbuttoned her glove. "There was something I wanted to say to you, Percival, and I shall hardly find a better opportunity."

Sinbad was forgotten in a moment: "Say on. Is it anything you want me to do?"

"You were very good to me last year," she said. (Percival disclaimed her praise with a quick movement of his hand.) "If ever you should have reason to think me ungrateful, I want to say that it will not be that I have forgotten: I don't forget. It will be that I could not help myself. There's no knowing what may happen. I only thought I should like to say so."

Percival half smiled as he looked her in the face: "No knowing? I think there is some knowing. Oh, don't be frightened: it is you who know, not I. You have some reason for saying this, of course."

"Perhaps," said Addie. "But I don't know. I only wanted you to understand."

"You remind me of what I used to learn about Gunpowder Plot long ago: 'Monteagle knew not what to think of this letter.' I feel very much like Monteagle. What is amiss, Addie? Am I going to be blown up?"

"We'll hope not."

"Monteagle had no chance of asking questions, had he? But then, you see, he had the sagacity of his 'most dread sovereign' to fall back upon. No matter: I will not easily believe any ill of you, Addie. We have been good friends, and I think I may trust you."

"No, don't trust me. That is just it."

She was so evidently perplexed and

troubled that he grew grave. "Must you talk in riddles?" he asked. "I don't like hints of something underhand and mysterious. I can't in the least imagine what you can possibly mean, or why I should ever think differently of you. But I have had a blow: a man whom I would have trusted with everything has just turned out a swindler. He was false all the time when I believed him most. The ugliest truth is better than that. And I don't think your truth can be very ugly, Addie. Let's have it out and make an end of it."

She shook her head: "It isn't mine. You don't know what you are asking: it isn't possible. Only some day you will think me rather mean: that's all. You trust people too much: you think every one is as good as yourself."

"If there are not a good many better, the earth will soon want salt," said Percival. "And don't trouble yourself about my excessive trustfulness: there's some hope of my getting rid of it at this rate, isn't there?"

"I wish I could say more," sighed Addie. "But even now I am half afraid—"

"Not of me, I hope. There's no occasion, really. I shall just take my chance and drift to the end of the chapter."

She looked almost wistfully at him, and sighed again, but said no more. The train rushed on through level fields and softly-swelling hills, and she watched the trailing cloud of white, which, lingering as it went, caught the sunlight for a moment on its rounded masses before they melted into the summer air. Percival was silent too. In spite of what he had said, he could not refrain from some wonder as to Addie's meaning. He thought of Horace; but what had Addie to do with Horace now? He thought of Sissy; but how could these two be sharers in a mystery? Besides, he had made up his mind that the shadow in Sissy's life was cast by a mere cloud, not by any substantial fact. She was not well: she was low-spirited, she had fancies. She could not tell him, because she could not put a sense of gray oppression into words. Already she was better, and when he took her away into new scenes and among new people, all

this vague grief and terror would be laughed at or forgotten. It was impossible that there could be anything known to Addie Blake and Sissy which could seriously menace him. "When women get a chance of talking mysteriously, they are sure to make the most of it," thought Percival. And yet "some day you will think me rather mean" was hardly like a romantic secret. There was a ring of prosaic certainty about such an anticipation as that. Percival was inclined to believe that if the nut were cracked some kernel of truth might be found, but he was not at all sure. He was quite sure that Addie believed there was such a kernel. But she might be mistaken; nor does every kernel, however carefully it may be planted and watered, necessarily produce a tree which will bear fruit. He had troubles of his own to think about just then, and felt disinclined for this nutcracking, which if successful would evidently get his informant into a scrape. "No: if ever I have to think her rather mean, she shall have no chance of returning the compliment," was Percival's final decision. And he felt a little glow of satisfaction as he came to it; which was all very well, for so far as it was not dictated by laziness it was inspired by a courteous loyalty to Addie Blake. (It would be useless to go into the question of proportions.) And when he had thus heroically determined not to exert himself, he leant back and his eyes wandered over the landscape, at first with that sort of undefined pleasure and attraction which we feel when a face in a crowd recalls the face of a dear friend. Perhaps a moment later we wake to the sudden consciousness that it is our friend himself advancing to greet us. It was so with Percival. First, as he gazed absently at the country round, it brought Fordborough and Brackenhill, as it were, into the background of his thoughts. A moment later he perceived that familiar landmarks were gliding past him, and that they were close to their destination.

He sprang out as soon as the train stopped and secured a fly for Addie. "Can't say much for the horse," he re-

marked as he came back. "There are only three. He's an awful screw, but I don't fancy he's worse than the other two, and I rather think each of the others is."

"I haven't far to go," she said as she swept along the platform in her queenliest fashion by his side.

"Remember me to Mrs. Blake and your sister when you write," said Percival.

She flashed a swift glance at him: "I will: good-bye." He lifted his hat, and she was gone.

"Queer I should have met her after my talk with Godfrey yesterday!" thought he. "She's handsomer than ever. I wonder if she ever cared for poor Horace? Why, she never so much as asked after him! Can't have cared very much. And yet I don't know. There is *no* knowing about such things." And shrugging his shoulders he dismissed the matter from his thoughts, and went to the White Hart to get a dog-cart to take him to Brackenhill.

A quarter of an hour later he was on his way. The soft air, the bright sunlight, the varying lights and shadows, the merry singing of the birds, the first wild roses in the hedgerows,—he noted them all as he sped along the pleasant road. But his eyes were sombre and the line was deeper between his brows. He had laughed about his errand to Adie Blake, but you may get laughter out of that which yields neither hope nor comfort. Laughter often goes well with bitterness, and Percival's soul was very bitter that day as he thought of the errand on which he had come.

If there was one thing he prized in the world, it was his independence. He knew well enough that it was something outside himself—no power or strength of his own. Training and temperament had conspired to make him as dependent as a girl, but he could defy them. "I am like a hermit crab," he had owned to himself—"uncommonly helpless unless I get hold of somebody's shell." But, after all, since his grandfather the rector had left him a handy little shell enough, he could face the world very

fairly. It might have been more spacious, no doubt. Brackenhill would have been a splendid shell, delicately tinted and lined with pearl, and our hermit crab felt that he could have filled it successfully. That, however, could not be his without two deaths, and he refrained as far as possible from thinking of such ghastly stepping-stones.

He had feared, as has been already said, that his marriage might entail upon him a certain amount of dependence on his grandfather, but through all his anxiety there had remained to him the certainty of that little shell of his own, into which he could retire if need were, and show his claws. He was not a homeless hermit crab, dragging himself over the sand, and so conscious of his defenceless condition that he must accept any shell that was offered him on any terms. Sissy, by an accident of inheritance, was more splendidly housed, and together they could resist all the power of Brackenhill—a fact which took away the desire to do so. While he was assured of the necessities of life Percival could accept or refuse its luxuries as he pleased, and he had been treated as if he conferred a favor when he consented to take them. He felt sure he could do without the luxuries at a moment's notice, and that he could compel himself to live within a much narrower income than he possessed. For, though he dearly loved his ease, he was clear-headed and accurate in money-matters, and if he lacked energy he had considerable powers of passive endurance. But if he were robbed of the necessities of life—Was there ever a hermit crab who could *make* himself a shell?

Yet, in spite of all his troubles, he was conscious of an increasing pleasure as he drew near to the old manor-house. Percival had never owned to mortal being the passion he had for Brackenhill—a passion which had grown up in opposition to his will. Every stone of its walls, every bough of its trees, was dear to him. He had gone there first with the intention of scorning it, and of showing his grandfather that he scorned it. In the latter he had so thoroughly succeeded

—at first in sincerity, and later through his unconquerable reserve—that the old man believed that this most treasured possession was worth but little in his favorite's eyes. It was his own fault, he would say to himself. He had exiled Alfred and his son, and the boy had grown up an outsider—a Percival, and not a Thorne, rather with feelings of bitterness against the Thornes. He had done it himself, and the retribution was just. Percival had said when first he saw his father's home that he "liked looking at old houses." That was all that Brackenhill was to him. The words were graven on the squire's memory, and no syllable had been uttered which would in the slightest degree efface them. It was the deepest longing of the old man's heart that Percival might reign after him; and even if it could be, his happiness would not be complete, since his boy despised Brackenhill. "Any other old house would do as well," Godfrey Thorne would say with a sigh. "Perhaps he'd sell the place if he had it, and buy another somewhere else. Only Sissy cares for it."

If any one had told him that his grandson cared more for the old house than he did himself, he would have answered with a smile of unbelief; yet it would have been true. Brackenhill was the background of all Percival's day-dreams. He loved the terrace-walk with its balustrade; the flight of steps, with mossy balls of stone on either hand; the entrance-hall, with its stately pavement of white and black; the great staircase, down which Sissy came with light footfalls and shining eyes. Above all, he loved the long drawing-room, with its antique furniture and its lingering perfume of the roses of years gone by.

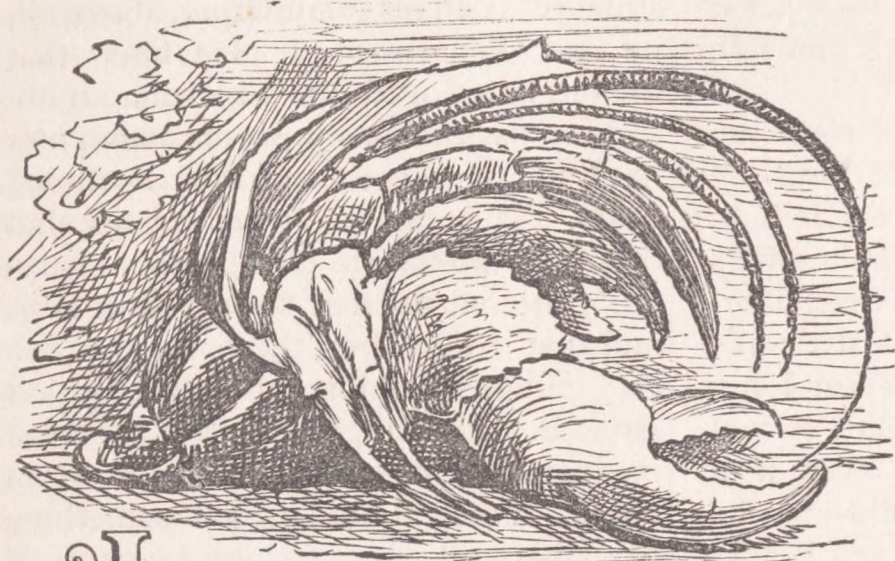
Not even to Sissy had a syllable of this passion been breathed. Percival's rôle from the first had been to accept the fact that his father was disinherited as a simple matter of course—not as a punishment inflicted, but as a bargain made. All that was lost for Sarah Percival was well lost: it was impossible to reason with her son on any other basis. He only dimly remembered her, and therefore she was a symbol of his ideal. He

wore her name proudly, as if it were a title. If any of the old people in the neighborhood said, "Ah, I remember your mother," his eyes flashed with sudden eagerness. It seemed to him that if he owned his fondness for Brackenhill, it might be thought that in his inmost heart he regretted his father's obstinacy. With his grandfather, above all, he had been reserved. He knew that the old man loved him with such an absorbing passion as old people sometimes have for the favorites of their declining years. They are sadly conscious that they have no time to change, that everything around them is strange and new, and that if they drop the hand to which they cling, trembling, they will be left alone in the world, having lost the swift instinct by which heart finds heart in youth. Percival understood something of all this, and, after a fashion, he returned his grandfather's affection. But he knew Mr. Thorne's desire to be supreme, and actively to regulate the destinies of those he loved, and, fearing his caprices, would not give a weapon into his hand which might be turned against the giver. He had kept him at arm's length hitherto, but now the Old Man of the Sea was to have his turn. Sinbad went to meet him with a sombre face, which softened as he drew near his journey's end.

For he was on the bit of road which he remembered so well, level and straight. To the right the wide meadows sloped gently down till they reached the river, and you caught the silver flash of water through the willows. To the left lay a long succession of low, rounded hills, or one long hill, for it was difficult to distinguish any particular eminences in the ever-varied undulations. And a little way up the ascent stood Brackenhill, a long, low pile of gray, warm on its southern slope, with its park and its stately trees and shaven lawns about it. Behind it rose the treeless and unchanging downs, tufted with gorse and bracken, grassy, sunlit and still.

Percival felt his heart leap up and then sink within him as he turned in at the gate.

CHAPTER XXVI.—OF CONFESSION.



IT is not pleasant to own to faults or follies, even though there may be a certainty of relief when the ordeal is over. Of course some confessions are worse to make than others. I suppose the difficulty ought to be exactly measured by the amount of guilt or foolishness, but I do not at all think it is. A Greek brigand would probably own to an additional murder or two more easily than a pattern Sunday scholar in his first place would confess that he had been overcome by the loose change in his master's till. Nor does it depend on the kindness of our listener. Sternness may give us a defiant strength—gentleness may add a keener sting to our pain. I incline to think that the real question is, Will he be surprised?

Confession is intolerable unless it is met halfway. Better be understood at once, even if you are overwhelmed with reproaches, than have laboriously to draw down the storm by explanations. One may give one pull to a shower-bath string in December, but to have to take pains to get it to work properly! And, let the hearer be as kind as he will, sympathy is impossible till surprise is overcome: the one must subside before the other can flow. Now, sympathy should answer to the appeal as the note answers

to the finger of the musician: if delayed, it jars.

Therefore, if you have acquired a character for headlong impetuosity you may go with a light heart (comparatively speaking) and own to some thoughtless action from whose consequences you want to be delivered. It will be unpleasant, but not half so unpleasant as if you had to explain that you

had missed your life's golden opportunity through a suspicious timidity.

Now, Percival had to make a confession which would cause the greatest surprise among his friends. It was not a crime: it was only an imprudence. But at Brackenhill the words Percival and prudence were supposed to be synonymous. He might well have that apprehensive line between his brows. Hitherto the hermit crab had shown his claws in a lofty and defiant manner, and had been considered rather a formidable animal than otherwise. But he felt very helpless and miserable as he dragged himself to Brackenhill to own that he had lost his shell.

The old butler received him very graciously, and told the footman to take out Mr. Percival's portmanteau.

"I haven't any luggage," said Percival with a smile. (It seemed to him that it was a very sickly smile, and he resolved to try and do better the next time there should be any occasion for one. But really, he reflected, smiling was very difficult.) "Are they all at home?" he inquired. Duncan explained that there was no one at home except the squire. Mrs. Thorne had gone up to town for the day, and would not return till late, perhaps not till the next morning. Mr.

Horace had gone to Mr. Garnett's to dine and sleep, and Mrs. Middleton and Miss Langton dined early, and had ordered the pony-chaise, saying that they should call on Miss Falconer, but would be back in the evening.

"It's all right," said Percival. "It is my grandfather I want to see. Is he in the library? I'll go." He took a step and then hesitated: "No, tell him I am here."

He turned into the drawing-room and stood on the hearth-rug. He drew himself up to his full height, and held his head all the more proudly that he should have to bend it soon. He gazed almost wrathfully at the portraits on the walls, at the quaint old-fashioned furniture, at the treasures of old china—things comparatively worthless to untaught eyes, but speaking plainly to him of the patient accumulation of many years. Because he prized them they irritated him. How many generations of Thornes had lived at Brackenhill in a sort of stewardship, guarding these things, adding to them, and bequeathing them to their successors! There had been Thornes who were wasteful and encumbered the estate with mortgages, but somehow they had struggled on. Nothing had ever been sold. Percival was angry, because he understood the delicate charm of all around him. He could scorn vulgar splendor, but not these possessions, which were honorable in his eyes, like an old name. "How was I ever to be independent?" he said to himself. "Why wasn't I taught to laugh at it all, and shipped off to keep sheep in Australia, like that Wingfield boy who used to play with Lottie Blake? He likes it well enough, I'll be bound; and he'll fall on his feet anywhere, while I—" And the tall young fellow, with his proud face and stately air, looked down at his hands, and could almost have groaned. He knew very well what beautiful hands they were—smooth, olive-skinned and useless.

His grandfather came up the room with a quick, nervous step and an expression of unmistakable anxiety in his eyes. What did this sudden visit mean?

For a moment he scanned his favorite as if he feared some accident might have happened, and Percival might have arrived, like a Chelsea pensioner, with much glory and a scarcity of limbs. But there was no sign of any such calamity as the young man advanced a step or two to meet him; and when the squire saw his defiant manner and met his glance, he said to himself that somehow he had offended Percival. It was a relief to him that his grandson shook hands with him. Just for that moment more the hermit crab looked very formidable indeed.

"Sissy is out," said the old man. "If she had known—"

"Perhaps it's just as well," Percival replied. "I wanted to speak to you, if you are not busy."

The other shook his head: "No—what is it?"

"Have you looked at the paper this morning?"

Now, the squire had been reading the *Times* in the library before luncheon, and had been very much astonished at the Lisle catastrophe. He had said to his sister, "Just look here! *That* is the man Alfred trusted when he wouldn't trust his own father! Left Percival in *his* charge: I wasn't fit to take care of the boy—oh no! A pretty sort of guardian, eh? If this had happened three or four years earlier, where would that money be?" But Percival's arrival had so alarmed him that the whole thing had gone out of his head.

"Yes—why, yes," he said. He began to wonder how Percival could have got into the paper, and how he could have missed the paragraph. The wildest ideas went hurrying through his brain. The boy couldn't have gone and married some one within three weeks of the wedding-day? It was a comfort that there was no lady visible. Or accidentally made an end of some one? "I looked at the paper—yes, certainly," said the squire, trembling with anxiety.

"Did you see anything about Mr. Lisle?" Percival demanded.

"Lisle? Oh yes, of course. What an abominable affair! and what a consum-

mate rascal the fellow must be!" He pulled up suddenly. It was possible that Percival might have something to say in defence of his father's friend; but the young man made no sign. "Why, as I was saying to your aunt Harriet, if this smash had come three or four years earlier he might have ruined you."

"He has."

"Eh?" said the squire blankly.

"He has."

Percival saw the truth, which he had delivered like a violent thrust, slowly making its way through the barriers of preconceived ideas. He saw the faint gleam of triumph dawning in the old man's eyes—of triumph and pleasure that could not be altogether disguised. For a moment he almost hated his grandfather.

"Ruined you? he *has* ruined you? Percival, do you really mean it?"

Percival bent his head.

"And you were always so wise in money matters!" said the squire with a kindly smile of amusement. "What! did he swindle you too? Told you of some very special investment, eh? How much per cent. were you to have, Percival?"

"I wasn't worth so much trouble: he had nothing to do. Only we never had a settlement when I came of age."

"Never settled matters then? How on earth did that happen?"

"I should advise you to adopt the theory that I was a fool," said Percival bitterly. "It will work very well."

The old man was not offended at the young fellow's sullen manner. It would have been difficult for Percival to have offended him. He was ready to be a partisan had it been a case of murder, or marriage as in his first wild fancy.

"Ah, well! what does it matter?" he said, rubbing his hands and looking eagerly up at the other's face. "If that old swindler had done no more harm to any one than he has done to you, one might forgive him."

"He has taken all I had," was Percival's dull reply.

"Hardly. For he hasn't taken all *I* have. Come, my boy, there's nothing

to look so grave about. What was it? But never mind."

Godfrey Thorne's eyes were glistening with gratification. Seven-and-twenty years earlier his son Alfred had defied him, and defied him successfully. He had inflicted the heaviest punishment in his power—he had lavished his deepest tenderness; but Alfred first, and then Percival, had held aloof, giving him to understand that they did not fear his anger and did not stand in need of his kindness. He had felt that he was beaten, though he could not bear to acknowledge it. And now all at once came his moment of triumph: his boy was there to seek his help; he was head of his house once more.

"No matter," he said. "While I live you will hardly want, I think; and when I die you will have Brackenhill."

Percival looked him full in the face in grave surprise.

"Perhaps you will get to like the old place," his grandfather went on. "I think you will if you give it a fair trial. There have been Thornes here a long while. Sissy likes it very much: ask her. Of course I don't want to bind you in any way, but it is a good house, you know. If you gave it a fair trial—"

"What are you talking about?" said Percival.

"I say that when I die you will have Brackenhill."

"And I say No."

The other's face fell. "You mustn't cross me in this," he said. "Was it possible that even now the cup should be dashed from his lips? 'What do you mean? You are the eldest—you are the heir.'"

"Horace is your heir," said Percival. "If he had done anything to forfeit his position, it would be another thing. But he has been brought up from the first in the belief that he was to succeed you, and it would be the height of injustice to make any change now."

"And how about the injustice to your father and yourself?"

Percival's head went up: "We accepted your terms. I see no injustice there."

"But, surely, you will not deny my

right to do what I will with my own. Do you mean—"

"Of course you *can* do what you like with it," said the young man. "If you choose to rob Horace, I can't prevent it. But I needn't be a party to the robbery." Thus the hermit crab showed his claws.

"And if it were that or nothing? No, Percival, no! I was only joking." For a sudden fire had flashed in Percival's dark eyes. "You are judging me hastily too. How do you know Horace has not done anything to justify this?"

"Simply because he told me he had not. He said that you had exacted a promise from him, and that he had kept it and would keep it."

"Did he tell you what that promise was?"

"No."

"Shall I?"

"As you please."

"You must not trust Horace," said Thorne deliberately.

"I would stake my life on his truth," was the hot reply.

"So would I have done—once—and lost it. The promise he made in the morning was broken before night. But he has never owned it."

"There must be some mistake: I can't believe it," said Percival.

The old man shook his head: "I have proof enough, if proof were needed. It was last summer, when you were both here."

"At the agricultural show?"

"Yes. If you want to be very exact, it was the second day of the show. I had heard some talk the day before about Horace and Miss Adelaide Blake, and it didn't please me—an underhand flirtation with one of that man's daughters, and that vulgar gossip, Lydia Rawlinson, to tell me of it, giggling all the time to think how nicely I had been kept in the dark."

"You didn't prefer her word to Horace's, I hope?"

"No. I spoke to Horace, and told him that I didn't care about old Blake and his British Flour, and I didn't choose that he should have anything to do with Miss Adelaide. And he said there was

nothing in it at all, and that, though he liked her very well, he didn't care if he never saw her again." Percival's eyes were lighted with eager attention. "He would make me any promise I liked, but he assured me none was needed; and he half laughed as he said it, as if the idea were absurd. And he finished by inquiring whether he might bow if he met her, as he would rather not be rude."

"And you told him—"

"That I didn't mean he should do anything ungentlemanly, of course, but anything more than the merest politeness would be at his peril, for if I detected anything underhand I had done with him for ever. And he stood up before me as boldly as you are standing now—still, with that sort of half smile, as if I were the most unreasonable old fellow on the face of the earth ever to have had such a suspicion—and said, 'On my honor, sir, Addie Blake is nothing to me, and never will be.'—'Very good,' I said: 'you are warned, and you may go.' And, between nine and ten that very night my gentleman was walking with her in Langley Wood!"

"Ah!" said Percival, looking down.

"I never told him I knew it," said the squire. "What was the good? For Harriet's sake too: there's no knowing what may happen, and why should she be tormented? But that was an end of everything. I'm not going to quarrel about it. He thinks he has cheated me: let him. Perhaps when I die he'll find out he hasn't: that's all. Only since that time I've watched a little. What sort of hand does Miss Addie write?"

"Big—black," said Percival.

"Ah! Mrs. James dropped a letter out of one of hers, and looked at me to see if I had noticed it. That woman would do magnificently for a stage-conspirator. Well, Percival, do you understand now why I don't think much of Horace?"

"Perfectly."

"You are satisfied?"

"The story is most convincing," said the young man. "Only there is a flaw in it. It happens that on that particular evening I had the honor of being Miss

Blake's escort through Langley Wood." He let the words drop leisurely, as one who expected to produce an impression. He produced none.

The squire smiled: "Not that evening, I think: another perhaps. Miss Blake had a taste for moonlight walks, I see, but on that particular evening I know who was her companion."

"Silas Fielding was mistaken," said Percival.

The old man started: "Silas Fielding! Oh, you have heard, then? Did Horace—"

"Why, I was there. He mistook us in the moonlight."

"No, no! it is impossible. No one could mistake you: you are not a bit alike. I don't know why you want to screen Horace."

Percival produced a bunch of keys from his pocket, and singled out a small one. "Not a bit alike?" he said. "Think of Horace, and look in the glass." He unlocked a desk on a side table, and came back with a *carte de visite* in his hand. "Whose photograph is that?" he asked.

Mr. Thorne had half-forgotten Tom Felton's attempt and its result, but he did recollect that there was something curious about a photograph of one of the boys. Apparently, this was Percival, so he concluded that a trap was laid for him, and that it was really Horace. But his perplexity was not diminished. If he said "Horace's," it could not be denied that there was a strong likeness between the photograph and the man who stood before him. If he said "Yours," he might be told he was mistaken. He said, "I don't know."

"Well," said Percival, "we must be rather alike if you can't tell which sat for that. And we are. The coloring is altogether different, but the outline is very nearly the same, and a year ago the resemblance was much greater. I have reasons for remembering that evening, and I do remember it. I went with Miss Blake on an errand of which she had no need to be ashamed, but the reverse. Silas Fielding came upon us suddenly in the wood, and was startled. He

knew Miss Blake by sight, and of course he had heard the Fordborough gossip; so, seeing her, he expected to see Horace. And as I stood there, just the same height and general appearance, and very likely with that felt hat I wore slouched rather over my face, of course in the dusk he *did* see Horace. It is all clear enough."

"It *was* dusk," said the squire. "That was between half-past nine and ten?"

"Yes. A good deal nearer ten than half-past nine."

"And at a quarter-past ten you had come in from the garden to get a shawl for Sissy, and didn't know where Horace was. I noted the time next day when Fielding was talking, because I remembered that Horace was certainly out then. I congratulate you on your walking powers, Percival."

"I didn't walk. I got a lift."

"Ah! Who gave you a lift?"

"A young fellow: I don't know his name."

The squire could not repress a smile: "No, no, Percival. This is quixotic: why should you screen Horace? I tell you I know all about it. Silas Fielding was not my only informant."

"He was an artist, up at old Collins's farm," said the young man, pursuing his own train of thought. "But what does it signify? If you have any doubt still, ask Sissy. I think she would be sure to remember: at any rate, I could bring back the evening to her mind."

"Ah yes, and Sissy's testimony would settle it."

"Of course," said Percival. "She could say with which of us she spent the evening in the garden. The whole thing is absurd, because I know perfectly well how it all happened. But you have misjudged Horace cruelly. Sissy shall bear witness and set everything straight."

"So be it," was the quick rejoinder. "You accept Sissy's testimony? She has given it already. She says that you were with her during the whole of that evening, but that she does not know what became of Horace for the greater part of the time."

"Sissy never said that."

"She did. She told me so when I went to her directly after Silas Fielding left me."

"She didn't understand what you asked her. It isn't possible."

"It isn't possible that she misunderstood me. I told her that I had heard that Horace was out the evening before—that I didn't want any fuss made about it, but that I must get to the bottom of the matter, for if it were true that he had been in Langley Wood with Adelaide Blake, he would never be master here; and he knew it."

"What did she say then?"

"She was agitated at first, but she persisted that you had been in the garden all the evening: she could not answer for Horace. Percival, you *must* be mistaken about that particular day. You said you would take her word."

"Did I?" said young Thorne. "Then I will."

"That's right," the squire began with an air of relief.

But his grandson went on: "I will take her word, but it must be from her own lips, if you will bring her, and she will repeat it here, to my face. If you choose to bring her here—"

Godfrey Thorne understood it all, and knew that those eager, trembling assurances that Percival had been in the garden all the evening would never be repeated to Percival's face.

"No, there is no need," he said after a moment's pause, during which he reflected that Brackenhill must surely come to his boy some day. "There has been a mistake, I suppose, and there is nothing more to be said. I'll take your word for it. We will say no more about it, will we? We'll let the matter rest, eh? What do you say?"

Percival stood with lips compressed, as if he had not heard.

Mr. Thorne would willingly have been deceived to the day of his death. He was not inclined to be hard on Sissy's treachery, for several reasons. First of all, she was Sissy, and, though second to Percival, second to him alone. And then his mind refused to grasp the fact that all his suspicions of Horace were built on the statement concerning that evening which

Percival had just swept away. The year's suspicion stood, though its cause was gone. Our beliefs are not like our houses: they do not necessarily tumble about our ears because their foundations fail, or, at any rate, they are a great deal longer about it. If Horace had not been in the wood that particular night, he had been playing an underhand game somehow. Falsehood concerning that one interview would really have been nearer justice as a whole than that little isolated truth. The old man did not put this into so many words, but he felt it. And Sissy had been working with him—working for Percival, working in the good cause. One does not desert one's accomplices. And, finally, it was a girl's falsehood, and the old squire was disposed to be lenient to women in many ways. He had no doubt as to their inferiority, and judged them by a different standard. For instance, men told lies, women told—fibs. If a man told a lie, well, you knew what to think of *him*. But, if a woman told a fib, you shrugged your shoulders, laughed perhaps, especially if she had got the better of some one you disliked—scolded her perhaps, but thought very little more of it. It might be that he felt that a woman had a truthfulness of her own which her white lies did not affect. Women are often referred to that indirect influence which they are supposed to exercise over things in general, and which they are assured is a sufficient right. Perhaps it was only just and logical in Godfrey Thorne, holding this idea, to wink at their attaining the indirect influence by slightly indirect means.

But how about his grandson, who held that women should maintain a pure and tender ideal to which men, amid the rough scramble of their daily life, might turn for gentle thoughts and sweet reverence, patient endurance and unconquerable truth? The squire was not quick to decipher such a creed, but some outline of it was written very plainly on Percival's face in the features sternly set as if they were cast in bronze, and the eyes filled with surprise and indignation.

"We seem all to have been making

mistakes, don't we?" said Godfrey Thorne. "Silas Fielding and Sissy and I; and you with old Lisle, eh? Suppose we let bygones be bygones, and start fresh and think no more of them?"

"We will talk of something else this moment, if you like," said Percival, "with all my heart."

"And you won't be hard on Sissy?" the old man persisted. "Percival, don't look so stern: you will terrify the poor child. I must have your word: you will be gentle with her?"

"I hope I shall not be unjustly hard on Sissy or any one."

"Remember how delicate and easily frightened she is. Percival, don't be too angry about a mistake. We all—"

"I think," young Thorne interrupted him, "that the less you and I say about this mistake of Sissy's the better."

But the squire, who felt that he had unconsciously betrayed her, could not control his anxiety. "Remember," he said, "it was for you."

There was a shadow on the young man's face: "I do remember. But don't let us talk of this. Things are easily said, but no power on earth can unsay them." And with a quick movement of his hand, as if enforcing the silence for which he asked, he turned and went to the window.

He stood looking out on the terrace, trying to think, and failing signally. He was conscious only of a vague feeling of anger and helplessness, as if the earth were cracking and failing under his feet. He dared not speak, lest some one of the impulses which contended within him should get the upper hand and pledge him to something definite. He had gone on his way so proudly and independently, as he thought, and all the while he had been a mere puppet in others' hands. Sissy had been scheming to enrich him, and Mr. Lisle had smilingly robbed him. But the fraud which seemed so all-important that morning as he journeyed to Brackenhill was dwarfed by the treachery nearer home.

"Percival, I've acted very wrongly toward you," said the squire from his easy-chair.

Young Thorne turned round with a reluctant air. Could it be that some fresh revelation awaited him?

"Seventy-seven. I may die any day," said the squire.

"So may I," said Percival.

"Ah, but you may live fifty years." Percival shrugged his shoulders, and hardly seemed enchanted at the prospect of the half century. "But my time must be short, and I have risked your future. It seems to me now that I must have been mad."

"Do you mean you haven't made a will?"

"Yes, I made one. I suppose you would be all right if I hadn't. Hardwicke has it. It was five or six years ago, when I had never seen you, Percival. Since then I have been planning how to set the old injustice right, and putting it off from day to day and year to year, because no half measures would content me. Now, I have written to Hardwicke: he is coming over next week, when these people are gone. I meant to settle everything before your marriage: I ought not to have put it off an hour. Seventy-seven: it is madness! You must not think I did not care about you, but I wanted to be just to Horace. He had claims, and I hesitated about leaving Brackenhill away from him without a cause. And of late, when I thought he had forfeited them, he was so ill: it seemed— But what's the good of talking? There's no excuse possible for putting things off at seventy-seven."

"I had no right to expect anything, sir."

"No, don't say that: it cuts me to the heart. After all, I could make it safe for you at five minutes' warning."

"It must be a short will," smiled the other.

The squire got up. "Come and see," he said.

Percival followed him to his library, and stood by while he found his keys and laid a document out on the table. The young man stooped and read. Horace had a mere pittance, Mrs. Middleton a life-interest in a sufficient sum, Sissy a part of the family jewels: one or two

trifling legacies were left to old friends. He lifted his head when he came to the end: it needed but three signatures to make him the future owner of Brackenhill—less than five minutes, as his grandfather had said.

"Mitchell of Stoneham made that after the Langley Wood affair," said the squire. "One day, when I was out of temper with Hardwicke, I went and gave the directions. But I cooled down, and then I didn't like the idea of righting you in an underhand way, as if I were ashamed of it, and I vowed that old Hardwicke should make the will, as he had made the others. It was natural Hardwicke should stand up for Horace," said the old man apologetically: "he has known him all his life. So I told Mitchell to let me have it and I'd think it over."

"I am glad," said Percival.

"But now I'll tell you what we'll do," Godfrey Thorne went on. "If you'll ring the bell I'll sign this, and Duncan and one of the men shall witness it. Then I shall feel happy about to-day, and to-morrow I'll go over to Hardwicke."

"Go to Hardwicke to-morrow by all means, but you mustn't sign this: there's no need. I think"—he smiled—"we may wait one day more."

"No, don't let us have any more waiting." The eager squire had the pen in his hand.

But "No," said Percival. "What are you afraid of, sir? Of some accident between this and to-morrow? Well, if there were one, God forbid that you should leave this will behind you! How could Horace accept his rights as a gift from me? What could I say for myself if they taxed me with sneaking down here while they are away to induce you to sign a will which we both knew was a cruel injustice? After what has been said between us to-day I should deserve to be scouted. I would sooner break stones on the road than take a penny left me by that will."

"Perhaps you are right," said the squire; and he slipped the blotting-paper with careful carelessness over the

offending document. Percival saw and smiled. "But, after all," said the old man, "what am I to do? What am I to say to Hardwicke?"

"Isn't that for you to decide? Only be just to Horace."

"But for yourself: say what you would like. What would you take without all these scruples? Ah, you have a wish! I see it in your eyes. What is it?"

(It was the true sultan fashion: Ask, and I will give it thee, even unto the half of my kingdom.)

"Well, I *have* a fancy," Percival owned. "But perhaps you only mean an income or a lump sum. You would not like to divide the property, even if it were but a small part? The Thornes never have, I suppose."

Godfrey Thorne, who would have scoffed at the mere idea of such a thing ten years earlier, caught at it now: "Haven't they? Perhaps not. So much the better. I'll be the one to begin."

"Then," said Percival, "give me Prior's Hurst."

It was a small place—half farm, half manor-house—about fifteen miles away, on the edge of the little wood from which it took its name. "Give me Prior's Hurst and a moderate income—nothing that will burden the estate—and I shall be content."

"It is an out-of-the-way place," said his grandfather.

"How long have the Thornes had it?"

"Almost ever since the Reformation. We bought of the man who got it then."

"So I thought. And Brackenhill?"

"Oh, not till much later."

"Exactly," said Percival. "There were Thornes at Prior's Hurst before there were Thornes at Brackenhill. Why shouldn't there be Thornes at Prior's Hurst again? Since I am the elder, give me that."

"And I will," said the squire, rubbing his hands and looking up with a proud air of possession at his tall grandson. The solution of the problem pleased him. He was glad to do for his favorite what no Thorne had ever done, but there was something of unreality about the transaction: for a little while and the whole would surely be Percival's.

The young man did not feel this so strongly. Hammond's chance remark, "Probably you think him in greater danger than he really is," had driven him to the opposite extreme. James Thorne had gone abroad for his health, had come home, had married, had lived some time: why not Horace? He would be careful: he could have everything that money could buy. He would never be strong, but "God grant he may live many years!" said the next heir. Percival's renunciation of Brackenhill that day was real.

"I think I'll go and have a look at the garden," he said. "But, first, I have a favor to ask."

"Ask it," said the squire.

"Will you let me burn that unsigned will?"

"Why? It does no harm."

"Suppose it gets mislaid among your papers, and Horace should find it, how uselessly it would pain him!"

"That's true. Well, I'll look it up: I don't see it just this minute. I'll burn it to-day or to-morrow, you may trust me."

"I don't suppose you *do* see it," said Percival, "as it is under the blotting-paper, which is under your elbow. Let me burn it now: it can be no good. Signed, I could not take what it gives me; and unsigned—"

"Take it, then," said Thorne, shrugging his shoulders. "You'll lead me a life if you are always as obstinate as to-day."

Percival swept away the summer finery of the grate and laid the paper down. His grandfather watched him in silence, pushing out his lower lip, as he found a match and knelt on the rug to light it. There was a quick rush of flame as it touched Mr. Mitchell's work, and the leaves which might have meant so much curled and shrivelled into useless tinder. The wavering firelight shone strangely for a moment on the young man's face in the golden afternoon. There was something awful and irrevocable about the deed, now that it was done. *What* was it that had suddenly flared into nothingness with that hot breath on his cheek? He got up with a little flush on his face,

and his eyes and lips were grave as if he had been offering a sacrifice.

His grandfather smiled: "So much for a quixotic piece of folly."

"Folly? I don't see it," said Percival. There was a crisp rustling in the ashes at his feet.

"But I do. And I ought to know what folly is at seventy-seven: I've seen enough. Well, you are a good fellow, and your folly is better than most folks' wisdom."

The last spark died in that little black heap. Percival, who had been gazing at it, looked up. "I didn't know you were an admirer of folly," he said. "I often am."

"Very good! Only if you are going out, don't carry your folly so far as to forget your dinner. Duncan said you were not going to stop."

"No. I shall go back to town to-night."

"I ordered dinner at half-past five: that will give you time. And now I am going to write to Hardwicke; so good-bye for the present, Mr. Thorne of Prior's Hurst." Percival had his hand on the door when the old man called anxiously after him, "I don't know when Sissy comes back, but if you meet her you will remember—"

Percival interrupted him: "I cannot forget."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SISSY ENTERS INTO KING AGAG'S FEELINGS.

PERCIVAL passed out into the garden, thankful to be alone. He crossed the terrace and went down the stone steps—the terrace reminded him too forcibly of Sissy—and, plunging into the shrubbery, walked to and fro with his head bent and his hands behind his back. Gradually, and without conscious thought, there came into his soul, not clearness, but a better understanding of his perplexity.

He hated scenes, recriminations, quarrels. His indolence made him gentle in his manners as a rule. Having always been strong and well, he had nothing of that irritability which is more bad health

than bad temper. Consequently, he wondered that he should ever be warned to be lenient in his dealings with any one, and imagined himself very tolerant and merciful indeed. He had no idea how stern he could look, nor how obvious it often was that he *chose* to yield. His grandfather's entreaty that he would be merciful to Sissy had awakened in his mind the remembrance of Aunt Harriet's exclamation when she heard of his engagement: "You won't be hard on her, will you?" He had resented that as he had resented the pleading of this afternoon. But as he walked under the freshness of the green boughs he began to understand it, for it seemed to him that he *was* hard. He could say much for Sissy in justification and extenuation; he could have pleaded her cause with abundance of words; he fancied he could have touched others, and yet he could not touch himself. It was like digging through a shallow soil and striking a layer of adamant. Let him say what he would, it always ended in an eternal protest: it was a lie, and therefore to be utterly abhorred.

There were many things he could have pardoned, and his pardon would have been calmly accorded and complete. A wrong done to himself, for instance. But how was any man to pardon a wrong done to truth? Would he not be in some sort a sharer in the falsehood which he affected to forgive?

He hoped he was not unjust to Sissy. He would have believed she might be weak, and he counted it his right to guard and care for her, but he had never doubted her utter rectitude. And there was something monstrous to him in the idea that she should have deliberately wronged Horace—Horace her boy playfellow and protector—Horace who had printed little letters to her before she could read ordinary writing—Horace who had had her childish love and baby kisses years before he, Percival, ever set foot in Brackenhill. And had that been all? But she had been willing to share the spoil. He could not be unjust enough to imagine for a moment that Sissy had calculated on her own advantage in this, but such

advantage should have been unendurable to her.

No, he could not forgive. And yet—Poor Sissy!

It would appear that Balak, the son of Zippor, had great faith in a change of place when he sought to transform a blessing into a curse. Percival did not think much of the biblical precedent, and did not desire the same result, but he tried the experiment. He glanced at his watch, found that he had half an hour to spare, and went to that lonely garden-walk where six months before he had asked Sissy to be his wife. Even to that melancholy corner the glory of summer had come, had flooded it and filled it with sunlight and verdure and perfume. The very moss on the pathway, which had been a blackish crust, shone now like greenest velvet touched with gold. The blossom's loveliness was gone, but the green of the leaf was delicately fresh. The birds were singing on the boughs, and there lingered in the cool shadows a few late flowers of narcissus, solitary on their stalk and shining like sweet white stars in the dusky gloom.

Alone he stood where they had stood together, and it is not to be denied that the locality had a certain effect. She rose up more clearly before him in her delicate and gracious loveliness—little Sissy who had stood there with wistful eyes uplifted to his face. He seemed to feel her soft hands on his arm or about his neck, and a thrill ran through him at the fancy as a thrill had run through him at the veritable touch. But even as he softened his lip, curled in sorrowful disgust at his own weakness. Was he to yield something of his truth to the mere charm of Sissy's presence?

After all, what was the use of his deliberations? Their two lives were to be spent together, for if the falsehood repelled it also bound him, since it was for him it was uttered. He would not profit by it, but he could not punish it. He had resigned his wider visions for a sweet home-life with Sissy, and now the delicate bloom had been brushed off his love, and he must resign that in its turn for something lower. He would speak

to her, since he could not pass it over in silence, but he would speak gravely and gently and with perfect self-restraint. And perhaps in years to come at Prior's Hurst truthfulness and trust might spring up and grow anew between them. It could not be as if wrong-doing had never been, but a new faith might arise on the ruins of the old.

He would be gentle. The hardness that was in him came out in the sternly-accented determination of this resolve. Nothing should induce him to bandy reproaches with the girl who had fallen from truth in her desire to serve him. By his own deed he had made her his. He would not pass over what she had done: he would not deny his own ideal, far off and perfect as a star. But no words of hers should wring an angry word from him: he swore it to the blue sky as he stood on the very spot of ground where he had taken her to his heart. "You won't be hard on her?" No, he would not be hard.

But Percival did not consider that there are two kinds of anger which are terrible. People may be out of temper, sullen or stammering, with swollen veins—unreasoning, unjust. These one may fear while the fit lasts, or one may feel pity or disgust, but they are the lower in our eyes for their rage. But when a man neither masters nor is mastered by his passion, when he *is* his indignation, a righteous wrath incarnate, neither narrow nor human, a burning fire for which his whole nature is but fuel—that fury of the whirlwind which men have made their type of spirit—then he is terrible and great. Or, again, when a man stands before you erect and self-restrained, with anger in his eyes and resolution in the lines of his quiet mouth, measuring his words, ruling his wrath, smiling if need be, and if need be listening (which is more), he too is terrible. Who knows the depth of his indignation? Who can say how long it may last? For aught we can tell there may be an eternity of anger behind his calm face. It was to be feared that Sissy might hardly be reassured by Percival's gentleness.

He went indoors and sat opposite his

grandfather, who watched him as he ate and drank with a happy air of proprietorship. Percival thrust all his troubles into the background, and was willing to enjoy himself. Since his life was after a fashion stunted and spoiled, it was well that the cookery was good and the wine chosen with especial reference to his taste. The squire, too, was discoursing pleasantly enough of Prior's Hurst, and what might be done to improve the house with pictures and old china. "You ought to have the old family portraits," said Godfrey Thorne: "as the head of the house it would be only right." Percival smiled, neither assenting nor refusing, but a little perplexed. It did seem to him right that he should have them. Surely such a legacy would prove to all the neighborhood that his father had done nothing amiss when in his old quarrel with the squire he held to his word and his heart and Sarah Percival. But at the same time it pained him to think that he should rob Brackenhill.

"Listen!" said his grandfather abruptly: "don't you hear wheels?"

Percival nodded, emptied his glass and went to the window: "I can see them: they will be here directly."

"Just in time for a glass of wine after their drive," said Mr. Thorne.

The young man looked at his watch. "I must be off very soon," he said: "it's the last train, and I must not miss it. Send some wine for Sissy into the drawing-room: I want a little talk with her."

His grandfather hesitated, looking up at him. "You are not going to be—" he began, and stopped.

Percival completed the sentence with perfect calmness: "Hard on Sissy? Certainly not."

"Go into the drawing-room," said the squire with alacrity. "How surprised she will be! I will send her to you."

There was no time for consideration, and the matter was not worth arguing. Percival went into the drawing-room, crossing the hall as the wheels were heard crushing the gravel just outside. He opened the first book that came to hand and read a line or two. It was impossible in those brief moments to

go over his decision again, so he put it aside as a thing irrevocable, and leant over the page and read—

And she forgot the stars, the moon and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze:
She had no knowledge when the day was done,
And the new morn she saw not—

The door opened, and he lifted himself with a studiously quiet face. But it was George with his tray, a long-necked decanter on it and some slender-stemmed glasses. Percival dropped on his elbow again, with a half smile at his own discomfiture, and made another attempt at reading. But George had hardly found a clear space for his burden, and Percival had only managed

Oh leave the palm to wither by itself:
Let not quick Winter chill its dying hour!

when Sissy appeared in the doorway with a questioning face. It brightened into sudden gladness, and she flew half across the room like a butterfly. Her hand was outstretched, but she uttered no word because of George, who stood aside to let her pass as he went out. Then she lagged: then she stood still, a few paces from Percival, looking up into his eyes.

"Percival, you know?" she said.

"Ah, Sissy! *and you know*," he answered with a gentle emphasis.

Her hand had dropped by her side. Had she held it out to him he would have taken it, but she was afraid. He turned to the table and filled a glass of wine, which she accepted, because in taking it her fingers might brush his. The touch gave her courage. "Are you angry?" she asked, putting the untasted wine on the table by her side.

He shook his head: "No."

"Then you are worse than angry. What is it? I was always afraid," she said desperately. "And yet, O Percival! it was for you!"

"Ah, that's the worst of it," he answered. "A lie! and for me! And Horace?"

"Don't!" She had lifted her hands, and let them fall again. "I don't want to think about Horace; I don't like to look at him; I don't want him to touch

me; I can't bear it when he smiles at me. He doesn't smile at me so often now, and somehow I can't bear that either. But he has no right to everything: you have the right, you are the heir. When I couldn't go to sleep at night for thinking, I used to say to myself, It is all to do justice."

"Justice? My God!" said Percival; and there was a pause. "What made you think of it first?" he said. "How came you to tell my grandfather it was Horace who was away that evening? He says you knew it was important. But perhaps you didn't understand?" He offered her this loophole of escape. "Is it possible?" he questioned with lips and eyes. Had she taken advantage of it he would have had a moment of rapture and a lifetime of doubt.

"Oh, I understood," said Sissy, looking down. "But you didn't want him to know where you had been, did you? You said not. And I thought I had only to say 'Horace,' and it would be all right. How was I to know it would be so bad afterward?"

"So bad afterward?"

"Yes. I was always afraid to open my lips, for fear it should come out. I locked my door every night, lest I should talk in my sleep and Aunt Harriet should come in. I was afraid of her; and afraid of Uncle Thorne, lest he should scold me; and afraid of Horace when he came back ill, lest he should say a kind word to me; and afraid of Godfrey Hammond; and of you."

"Why of me?"

"Lest you should be angry."

"I am not angry," said Percival. "At least, I think not. I am sorry and I am startled. I thought we two were one, and that you loved me; and all the time you never understood me, I suppose, and I never understood you. You wanted to help me—with a lie. It is strange. And only three weeks from being man and wife!" he added in a half soliloquy. "Did you think I should never find out anything about it, Sissy?"

"I hoped it might be a long time, a very long time, first. And then, if I were not braver and stronger, as I hoped

I might be—then—one day—if I were very tired—I thought—perhaps—"

"My God!" said Percival again, as if he recoiled from a dimly-seen abyss. "When it might be too late to make any amends, or when I mightn't have the strength to do it—might acquiesce in the lie, and live in it!"

"You shouldn't be angry with me," Sissy exclaimed suddenly. "For it's worse to murder people than to say what isn't true—now, isn't it? And you say that Charlotte Corday was noble, and Jael, and—"

"What! you wanted to be a heroine? and for me?" said Percival. "You might have spared yourself the trouble, Sissy: I don't feel the least like a hero. Charlotte Corday would not have thought much of me, I fancy. Why are those women always in your head? I never said Charlotte Corday was my ideal. Charlotte Corday— Oh, my poor child! you don't understand. She earned the guillotine, and we were to earn—Brackenhill."

"It wasn't for Brackenhill," said Sissy.

"No, it was for me: I know it. But Horace— Ah, well! it is no use thinking of it now. He will have his rights, thank God! It is not too late. And I shall have a home for you—not so grand as this, but you will not mind that. And we must try what we can do to understand each other better in our new life, dear. Only always be true, Sissy—be true for my sake. No, I won't say that, for truth isn't really truth for anything but its own sake. But you will remember that there is no chance of happiness for us unless we are both true. See what pain this gives us. And, Sissy, I have been deceived right and left. If I could only feel that I might trust you—I am not asking for a promise, but you will think of it perhaps—and that you would trust me in all our lives to come!"

"Don't talk about the time to come," said Sissy: "what is the use? Nor about the time past: it has been very terrible, but now it is all over."

To Percival it had only just begun. "All over?" he repeated, and looked at her in stern surprise.

"Yes," said Sissy. "Oh, there may

be worse—I don't know—but there can't be *that* any more. I shall never go about again thinking, 'If any one finds out! If Percival is angry!' and feeling cold and burning all at once. Oh, I am tired! I wonder if I shall sleep now?"

She looked up at him. He stood, statue-like, with his eyes upon her. "It *is* worse," she went on; "and yet it is better, for it is done. I'm like that man in the Bible—what was his name? Agag. You know what he said?"

"Surely the bitterness of death is past. Was that what you meant?"

"Yes, that is just it. It is all over, and something else is over too."

"What is that?"

"All between you and me—for ever."

Percival stepped back in blank astonishment. Her words startled him as if a sudden flash of lightning had come out of a pink-and-white bindweed blossom. "Sissy! You do not mean that?"

"I do! I do! It must be so. Don't be angry with me, Percival: I can't help it. I know I promised, but you will set me free?"

He was amazed and bewildered, but as he stood, with his brows drawn down and his dark eyes questioning her, he looked the tragic hero to the life. It might have been a picture or a play, with that quaint old room for the scene, and in the foreground the lady slight, delicate and pleading, the cavalier stern and statuesque. She had her hands upon his sleeve—hands with sparkling rings, and lace falling softly about the white arms.

"Set you free? You don't suppose I would keep you to your word if your heart didn't go with it? Not if it cost me— Sissy, tell me, was I harsh to you?"

"No! A thousand times no! Perhaps if you had been— But you do not understand; and if I don't understand you, Percival, it would be terrible. Don't you see that it would be terrible—that it can't be?"

"Life is long, isn't it?" said young Thorne. "We might learn."

"No," said Sissy, "I am afraid: I dare not try. Oh, Percival, I'm not fit for you! I was never sure till now, though I was



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afraid, but now I *am* sure. Don't persuade me: I should go with you, and my heart would break. If we were alone together always, I think I should die."

"Sissy!" deeply wounded.

"Oh, you would be kind! I know it. But while you spoke so gently just now I could see in your eyes—"

"Yes?" Percival was guarding the expression of his face.

"That you were angry and pained and disgusted all the time."

"Not disgusted, Sissy."

"Well, then, you looked as if you were far above it all, though you wouldn't say one hard word, because I didn't understand, and you meant to be good to me. No, I don't understand *now*, for somehow I feel as if I had been truest of all just then."

The little clock on the chimney-piece struck seven, and startled Percival, reminding him that his time was very short.

"Then, Sissy"—he stepped forward as he spoke—"is it that you do not love me?"

"You are too good for me," she faltered. "I don't understand you: you said it yourself. Oh, Percival, don't be angry with me: we shouldn't be happy. Let me go." There was a frightened earnestness in her voice.

Not love him? She loved him as much as ever—more, if possible. He was always perfection in her eyes,—a prince—a hero—an archangel. But it must be allowed that to spend a lifetime with a grieved and indignant archangel would not be a reassuring prospect. Sissy's heart died within her at the intolerable thought. She had groped in the dark after the ideal she had fancied was his, and conformed to it, and had made herself the thing he hated. Not love him? Until that moment it seemed to her that she had never fully understood her love for him, but with love rose fear, like an irresistible torrent, and swept her from his side. There was nothing good in the whole world except the companionship which would be more unendurable than all.

"And is this to be the end?" said Percival at last.

It was an end of which he had never dreamed. He had been as confident of her clinging tenderness as of his own protecting devotion. Nay, more so, for he had feared he could not give his heart, true though it was, so utterly and unreservedly as Sissy gave hers. He might chafe and fret at the perplexities of his life, but he had never for a moment thought that the bond between

them could be severed. It was a November night when he read her love for him in her frightened eyes and stooped to kiss her lips. And now they had reached the sweet May month, which blossomed with the last graces and tenderness of courtship ere June should come with its riper and warmer beauty, and their wedding-day for its crown. And through the gliding weeks their two lives had been growing together, with no thought of such an hour as this. Percival forgot his disapprobation, his tone of gentle yet studied rebuke: he remembered only that he wanted Sissy, and that he was on the verge of losing her. "Is this to be the end?" he said.

"Yes," said Sissy, hanging her head; "only *don't* be angry."

"All over in a moment? Sissy, I can't believe it—it isn't possible! Are you in earnest, really in earnest?"

"Yes," said Sissy.

"I am to go away—for ever?"

"Ye-es," said Sissy with a little quiver in her voice, but unabated resolution in the carriage of her averted head.

There was again a moment's pause. Percival walked slowly to the other end of the room, came back and halted exactly in front of her: "Sissy, you must forgive me if I weary you, but I have only a moment. Is this decision of yours so absolutely fixed that I can do *nothing* to change it?"

"Yes," said Sissy.

"Then of course you are free. And—good-bye, Sissy!"

"Percival," said the squire, tapping lightly on the door—"Percival, that dog-cart of yours has just come round. Sorry to disturb you, my boy, but—"

"Thanks! I'll come," said young Thorne. He would have given much for another ten minutes, but he must go at once or he could not leave Brackenhill at all that night. "And I can't be here to-morrow!" he thought. "Horace would think I was scheming something underhand with the governor's will. Besides, I can't face them all now—that fearful Mrs. James too—and tell them— Sissy, are we to part like this?"

"No!" She turned to him suddenly,

and her great eyes were yearning and brimmed with tears in the delicate little blossom of her face. He opened his arms, and she sprung to him, kissed him, clung to him: her burning blushes were hot against his olive cheek, and the next moment she had repulsed him and torn herself away.

"Sissy," cried Percival, "by Heaven, it shall be all unsaid and undone! Not another word of this folly—"

"That was good-bye," she said—"good-bye for always, Percival. And—and—you didn't kiss me, you know, when I came in, before I said—"

The squire outside was envying them their youth and love and the happy anguish of their brief parting. But with his envy he combined a careful study of the minute-hand of his watch. It was progressing so rapidly as to suggest the idea that a Liberal government had somehow got into the works. "Percival, my dear boy, if you *must* go by this train, there isn't a minute to lose."

"Go!" said Sissy: "it is much the best. I shall tell them, and I shall say it was all my doing and all my fault." And she fled by the opposite door.

"Sissy!" he called after her, but she was gone. For one moment he stood irresolute, glancing from door to door, and then he dashed out into the hall. His haste and the gathering dusk spared him any question or scrutiny. He bade the old squire a hurried farewell, and ran down the steps.

"Your overcoat is in," the squire called after him as Percival swung himself up by the driver's side, "and I will see that all is made right—to-morrow."

"Thank you," Percival replied, waving his hand, and remembering with an effort that it was Prior's Hurst that was meant.

The old man watched the dog-cart as it rattled down the avenue, and even when it had disappeared he listened to the far-off sound of the departing wheels. "I think the boy looked strange," he said to himself. "It may be only my fancy, but I think he did. And he never once looked back!" Then he turned away, and the footman, who had been dis-

creetly waiting in the background, came forward and closed the big door with a heavy sound which went through Sissy Langton's heart. She had stolen into the drawing-room again. There was the chair he had set for her, there was the glass of wine he had poured out for her. Sissy could not endure to think that George might come in and drink that wine: it would be profanation. She touched it with her lips, but she was sure that she could not swallow it—it would choke her. She carried it to the window, and leaning out into the sweet stillness of the May twilight, she poured it at the root of the white jasmine. As it soaked into the earth she fancied for a moment that it looked as if she had shed her heart's blood on the terrace, where she and Percival had so often walked together. Coming back to the table, she set the glass down, looked round, and saw an open book. Instantly she recalled Percival's attitude—how he leant on his elbow and read, and lifted himself to greet her as she came in—and she caught up the volume. There was a step outside, and she fled with her treasure to her own room. There she hung over it, as Isabella over her sweet basil on that very leaf. She put no mark to keep the place, but if any one studies Keats from that copy, he will find that the book falls open there, and that the creamy smoothness of the page is dimmed in many places.

And Percival was being whirled through the cool dusk farther and farther away. "I will see that all is made right—to-morrow," the squire had said in his innocence, and the young man's lips wore a bitter little smile. What could to-morrow do for him? There are some to-days which to-morrow cannot heal, unless perhaps it is a to-morrow which is very far away.

"We shall do it, sir," said the driver, and his anxious face relaxed into an easier expression—"yes, we shall do it now for certain. It was a closish shave, but the old horse has come along uncommon well."

Thorne started from his reverie and put money into his hand. As he slip-

ped it into his pocket the man glanced at it and touched his hat. The transaction pleased him very well. He didn't understand why young gents always would cut it so uncommonly close, but it was a way they had, and he preferred them to ladies who liked to be in time and wished to know his fare.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BROKEN OFF.

PERCIVAL had expected that when he journeyed to town that night the Old Man of the Sea would be on his shoulders. But when the time came he never thought of the Old Man of the Sea at all. His thoughts were of Sissy, and they were disjointed, contradictory and powerless. How could he tell what to think? It seemed to him that he had never known her till that day. At one moment he would say to himself that he had taken her at her word too hastily. And, indeed, what she had said did not amount to much, but for one thing. She had implied that she was *frightened* at the idea of becoming his wife, and her eyes had told her fear even more plainly than her words. Afraid! but of what? For she had warmly declared her certainty that he would be good. Percival felt as if he had somehow caught a slender, trembling, wild creature which cowered at his approach, and was doubly scared at every attempt at friendliness. And he had fancied that he could shelter and guard her! He was cut to the heart to think that Sissy should be afraid of him. If she had defended herself, if she had reproached him and been angry when he had blamed her, it would not have pained him as did her terrified entreaties to be set free from his love. It was like a stab when he recalled her anxious eyes. Yet if he could not make her happy—and since perhaps they did not understand each other—might it not be better in days far off? Percival threw himself back and folded his arms: "What's

the use of thinking? I must just drift as usual."

But he could not help thinking. When he reached his rooms again he found a parcel of books and maps which he had ordered that he might plan his wedding-tour, so that no fancy of Sissy's should be unfulfilled. Near it lay another parcel from his tailor, and a letter from a sailor friend who had just heard of the approaching marriage and wrote to congratulate him. Percival thrust everything aside, and sat musing in his arm-chair till utter weariness drove him to bed.

Just at the same time Aunt Harriet was trying to get a little rest. But she was burdened with the weight of Sissy's tidings that it was all over, that her engagement was broken off, and that it was all her own fault, not Percival's. She would not say what was wrong: she was so tired she could not be scolded then. Only it wasn't Percival. He was good. But it could never, never be; she could not bear it; it would break her heart. "Thank Goodness!" thought Aunt Harriet, "the poor child has sobbed herself to sleep, and to-morrow may bring counsel. I can't think what can be amiss. I'll not say anything to Godfrey yet. Broken off? Why, it's impossible! The people are asked to the breakfast; and the presents, too! There *must* be some horrible mistake. I'll find out to-morrow; but oh dear! oh dear! just when I was so worried with the dressmaker and all! And I'm too old to set lovers' quarrels right: they are a generation too far away from me. I know it *is* Percival's doing, somehow: I never could feel as if I quite understood him. Oh, if it could but have been Horace, my own dear boy! If he had come home strong and well, and they had liked each other, I should have had nothing left to wish for. Oh, Horace! Horace!" and the old lady floated to a melancholy dreamland, very much as Sissy had done, only that her tears flowed in a tired acquiescence instead of in a passion of despair.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A REVERIE IN ROOKLEIGH CHURCH.



PERCIVAL awoke the next morning, gazed at the window, and perceived that a bee was trying to find a hole in the invisible wall which parted it from the blue vault and liberty. He smiled as he watched it: "Poor thing! did it expect to

find any flowers here? I suppose it wants to be free; but if it did get out the blue itself would be its prison, only so big it wouldn't know it. Are we ever free, I wonder, or does liberty only mean that we have not yet run our heads against our prison-walls? Poor wretch! how it frets! I must turn it out—directly." ("Directly;" that is, "immediately." Why does this word at the end of a sentence always suggest a slight delay? "Directly" in this case meant that Percival would stretch himself lazily and meditate a few moments longer.)

I fancy Queen Sleep has a multitude of attendant sprites, who wait upon us during the night. She bids them take our burdens of weariness and trouble and let us have some rest. We load them very heavily, poor little things!—so heavily sometimes that they cannot support the back-breaking weight, and fragments of our every-day anxieties slip down and mingle in our dreams. But the elves do their best; only now and then they are mischievous, and say they will at any rate have an exchange of burdens, so they toss their queer little perplexities to us to hold, and we have very fantastic visions indeed. It may be that they get so dull toward morning

with the burden of our dulness that they do not notice when we open our eyes, and thus we gain a moment's respite. It happened so that morning, till a little elf, who had been released by an earlier riser, suddenly burst out laughing, hands on hips, gauze wings quivering and droll head on one side: "What *are* you standing there for? Why, that fellow is wide awake, and talking about bees and liberty these five minutes!"

"So he is," said the drowsy sprite; and flinging his load to Percival again, he darted off.

The young man sat up with a suddenly-troubled face, forgot the bee and remembered everything else. "It isn't possible!" he said.

Something of Aunt Harriet's feeling awoke within him when he considered the matter by the light of day. I do not know that he thought of the presents exactly, but it did seem to him that he and Sissy had gone too far to draw back. What would everybody say? Percival hated the thought of the gossip with which Fordborough would be flooded. And what would his grandfather say? With whom would he be angry? For angry he would undoubtedly be. Percival could take no comfort from the thought that he would probably escape the old man's wrath, for he felt that Sissy must be sheltered at any cost. He could not walk off in easy impunity and leave her to bear the blame, yet Sissy was not dependent on his grandfather, *and he was*: there was the sting.

His heart was aching too. Even if he had Prior's Hurst, what would it be to him without Sissy? There was a doubt, far down in his soul, whether she had not touched the truth when she said they were not fit for each other and should not be happy. Unhappiness was possible there, but he was ready to run the risk. For was happiness possible elsewhere? It did not seem so to Percival. He had set his heart on Sissy:

she had given herself to him, and it was only three weeks to their wedding-day. It was true that he had told her she was free, but if she accepted the freedom thus granted she was forsworn. How many times had she told him that she was his for ever!

What should he do? He pondered many lines of conduct, and at last came to the somewhat feeble conclusion that if the next morning brought him no news from Brackenhill, he would write to, or perhaps see, Aunt Harriet, but that for that one day he would drift. Percival had an uneasy, half-satirical consciousness that his grave meditations generally ended in a determination to drift—a result which might have been attained without any meditation at all. He breakfasted, fighting all the time against importunate thoughts not to be easily banished. He stood by the window, beating an impatient tune upon the panes. "By Jove, I can't stand it, and I won't!" said Percival. "I'll go somewhere for the day."

He walked to the nearest station, and happened to stand by a respectably-dressed artisan who was taking his ticket. "Third—Rookeleigh," said the man.

"Where on earth is that?" said Percival to himself. "I'll go and see." He varied the class. "One first—Rookeleigh," he said, and followed the workman to the Rookeleigh train.

It was interesting—at least with an effort he could fancy it was interesting—to speculate what kind of place his destination might be. "Sounds rural," he reflected. "Ought to be plenty of trees, and rooks in them. Market? Perhaps. Inhabitants—say about eight hundred and fifty-three: the three has a business-like sound about it. Occupation? Agriculture and straw-plaiting. Church newly restored, no doubt, and the deluded parishioners think that is a reason for going to look at it."

Rookeleigh, when he reached it, proved to be a good-sized, sleepy country town, which seemed to have trickled down the side of a gentle hill and crystallized on its way. At the bottom of the slope loitered the most placid of streams, with

gardens and orchards on both sides. Most of the river-side houses were red, solid and respectable. Percival soon decided that the place was inappropriately named, as there was not a rook to be seen or heard. Its principal productions appeared to be poplars and pigeons. The result of his observations was that two householders out of three grew poplars, and three out of four kept pigeons. The tall trees quivering and the white birds flying against a background of unclouded blue had a quaint, peaceful effect. There was much houseleek growing on the steep red roofs, and a decrepit black dog lay dozing in the middle of the principal street. Percival strolled about the town and looked at shop-windows till the time came when he could go to the Red Lion for some luncheon. They gave him pigeon-pie, at which he was not surprised; in fact, he did not see how they could give him anything else, poplars being uneatable. He made his meal last as long as he could, and then studied the portraits of two or three country squires on their favorite hunters, for he had discovered that Rookeleigh was a place from which it was not easy to escape. Failing a train at 1.5, which would have interfered with the pigeon-pie and left him with the afternoon on his hands, he could not get away till 6.45. "A very good time too," he said philosophically. "I shall get back to dinner with an appetite."

The resources of Rookeleigh could not be said to be exhausted while the church, which was a little higher up the hill, remained unvisited. A small boy undertook to fetch the clerk, who kept the key, and while he was gone Percival sat on a large square tomb and wondered why its occupant or occupant's friends had chosen such a memorial. "There seems to be a wish that each person's death should cause a sort of little wart on the earth's surface," he reflected. "From the Pyramids to those low green hillocks I suppose it is all the same thing. Luckily, we can't all have what we want, and Time interferes with the plans of those who do, or the face of creation would be speckled with our miserable little grave-

stones. I'd rather be put away altogether when my time comes, and have the ground smooth over me; or if my name must be recorded somewhere, it might be on a bit of pavement."

The clerk appeared, more out of breath than seemed proper in such a quiet place as Rookleigh. Percival followed him into the church, which was spacious and dim and had something of faded, worm-eaten stateliness about it. The old man made a few remarks, but had not the unpleasant fluency of vergers in much-frequented places. The boy who had been Percival's messenger amused himself with a little stone-throwing in the churchyard, and the clerk, after a few glances over his shoulder, stole softly through the open door to pounce upon the guilty child.

Percival smiled and went up to the chancel. It was wide and not encumbered with pews, and he paused in the open space, noticing the effect of a slanting ray of light. All at once he said to himself, "This is just where I should stand if I were going to be married." And in fancy he tried to people the empty chancel with the guests who should have gathered for his wedding in three weeks' time. It was a dreary pastime in a dreary place. And when he would have pictured Sissy standing by his side, to be bound to him for ever, he could not recall her face and form with anything like their wonted clearness. No effort would avail. Indeed, after a prolonged endeavor it almost seemed as if he could call up nothing but two frightened eyes, which gazed at him out of the still atmosphere of Rookleigh church.

He shivered, and, hearing the old man's step behind him, broke the silence with the first question which came to his lips: "Do you have many weddings here?"

"Not many. Not but what it's a fine church for 'em. Plenty of room, you see, sir."

Thorne nodded. "What makes your pavement so uneven?" he asked.

The other looked down: "Why, it's old Mr. Shadwell: he's just under you, sir. It's his vault. He was rector here five-and-fifty years ago. He was a great

scholar, they say, and had five sons, all parsons like himself."

"All scholars too? And all buried here? You must mind what you are about, or the ghosts of the reverend family will be astonished some day by a wedding-party suddenly descending among them," said Percival as he turned away.

The old man pocketed his fee. "We'll be sure and have it mended before you come to be married here, sir," he called after his visitor, who passed out into the sunny glare.

Where next? A boat on that languid stream? Unhappily, people did not row on Rookleigh River, or would not let their boats if they did. Percival had to content himself with a walk along the bank.

Coming back, he halted, struck with a house on the opposite shore. It was a large, rather handsome red house, old, yet the perfection of neatness and repair—perhaps even a little too neat, like a fashionable middle-aged woman, who is never careless. Its garden lay spread, one uniform sunny slope, to the river's edge, and ended; not in possible inequalities of bank, but in a neat low wall. Even now, when June would soon dawn in its glory on the happy world, the house and garden suggested autumn to Percival, and he stopped to wonder why. He thought it might be partly the long straight path which ran down the centre of the slope, and which was of old gravel subdued in tint, and with a row of espalier apple trees on either side. Perhaps, too, many apple trees in a garden do suggest autumn as soon as their blossom is fallen. There is an idea of laying fruit away, of garnering a serviceable harvest. Espaliers, too, are not so much trees as just that amount of tree which will give the necessary apples for pies and puddings, as if one should say to Nature, "We do not like your heedless, unrestrained ways, and will see no more of them than we can help." On one side of the house was trained a tree, but not for any ripe delight of August peaches, though it took the sunniest wall. A pear. Percival had an unreasoning conviction that the pears would be hard—probably requiring to be

baked or stewed. Nor was there any wealth of climbing roses in the garden, but he could see chrysanthemums dotted at intervals down the long walk with neat precision, and he was sure that before they blossomed the place would glow with the earlier splendor of dahlias. Also, there were too many evergreens.

Down the central path came an old lady in slate-colored silk, carefully looking to right and left, and apparently removing an occasional snail or dead twig or injured leaf. Her dress glistened in the sunlight, and Percival watched her a while from between the hazel boughs before he became aware that there was some one else in the garden. A cross-path had its occupant, who came and went behind the laurels and aucubas with the unfailing regularity of a pendulum. The leafy screen was too thick for Percival to do more than see that some one passed on the other side; but each time, as she turned at the end to resume her walk, there was a glimpse of a soft gray gown, and once—surely once, for a moment—of a gray hat and golden hair. Again and again and again he caught the vanishing fold of her dress, but never again that momentary vision. Certainly there were too many evergreens. Why did she walk there? Swift though it was, the dreary regularity of pace told not of inclination, but of duty. Percival watched and grew impatient. "Why doesn't she come into the middle walk and help to pick up snails?" he said to himself. "Any one would who saw the poor old lady hunting about." The latter, who was vigorous and alert, and not so very old either, would not have been best pleased could she have heard his pity; and, what was worse, the wearer of the gray gown did not share it, for she left the old lady to deal with the snails single-handed.

Presently some people came along the footpath, and Percival, who did not choose to be caught watching, sauntered a little way to avoid them, laughing at himself for his interest in the mysterious lady as he went. "If I could have seen her I should not have given her a second thought," he said. He looked at his

watch, and was surprised to find that it was past six. He turned and retraced his steps, for he was walking away from Rookleigh, and as he went by the old red house he looked once more at the garden. Both the ladies had disappeared during his absence.

"Stupid!" said Percival. "If those people hadn't driven me away I should have seen her go. Now she will remain a mystery for ever."

The mystery did not long retain possession of his thoughts. As he journeyed homeward he recollected that at that hour the evening before he had parted from Sissy. There came a faint glow to his olive cheek as he remembered how she sprang to him and clung with her arms about his neck, and how he felt her tears and kisses on his face. His heart kindled at the memory, and then grew dull. "She was very sure of herself, or she had not dared," he thought.

It was past nine when he stood at his own door, having stopped to get some dinner on his way. He could eat in spite of all his perplexities. He was met by the announcement, "Two telegrams come for you, sir."

A telegram is not the alarming fact it used to be, but to be told of two awaiting him quickens the pulses of a man who seldom receives one. Thorne felt that something urgent had occurred. He walked quietly into his room, turned up the gas, saw the envelopes on the table, stretched out his hand to the nearer of the two, hesitated, took up the other and tore it open:

"Godfrey Hammond, Brackenhill, Fordborough, to Percival Thorne, Esq.: All is over. You could not have been in time. Will meet first train at Fordborough tomorrow."

He stood like a statue, but his brain reeled. "My God! She is dead!" he said at last. "I have killed her. And she wanted me, and I was not there!" If suffering could expiate sin, that moment's agony should have cleansed his whole life. He did not think, he did not attempt to think, what had happened at Brackenhill. Sissy was, in his eyes, as delicate as a butterfly or a flower. A

breath might kill her, and this telegram, with its "All is over," hardly seemed an unnatural ending to the passion and terror and hopeless renunciation of the night before. "All is over," she had said, and had torn herself from his arms. And what her sweet lips had uttered the hateful paper echoed—"All is over"—and lay there like incarnate Fate.

Percival lacked strength to open the other message. What could it tell him that he did not know? He felt as if the unavailing summons which was imprisoned there would stab him to the heart. Out of that envelope would rush Sissy's appeal to him, her last cry out of the black night of death, and no answer would be possible. He walked to and fro, casting troubled glances at it. His pleasant familiar room suddenly became a hideous torture-chamber, and a black pall had fallen over his life.

At last he opened the second message with fingers that quivered like aspen-leaves. The paper rustled in his hands as he unfolded it and read:

"*Mrs. Middleton, Brackenhill, to Percival Thorne, Esq.*: Your grandfather is dangerously ill. Come at once. Do not lose a moment."

He flung it down and faced the world, a man once more. It was not that he was heartless—that he did not care for the old squire who was gone. He felt the blow, but this was a grief which came out of the shadows into the light of common day. It was like waking from a death-like swoon to the anguish of a wound. A nightmare was transformed into a sorrow.

CHAPTER XXX.

OF A GOLDEN WEDDING.

As the 9.15 train slackened speed at Fordborough Station, Percival looked out and saw Godfrey Hammond standing on the platform. It was exactly what he had anticipated, and yet it gave him a little shock of surprise to see Godfrey just as usual, in a light gray suit such as he often wore at Brackenhill, trim, neat, alert, looking as if he had slept well and

breakfasted well, and watching the train with his glass stuck in his eye. Percival did not really expect to see any outward signs of grief. It was hardly probable that Hammond would appear with his clothes rent, lamenting aloud and casting dust upon his head, yet his unchanged aspect startled the young man. Have we not all been startled in the same way by the want of sympathy between outward things and our inward joys and sorrows? If our feelings change, do we not straightway want the universe made anew to our pattern?

Percival sprang out, and suddenly came within the range of Hammond's eye-glass. A smile of recognition dawned on the other's face. "Ah, here you are!" he said. Perhaps there was a little more firmness in his clasp as he shook hands with the young man. "That's well. I was considering what I should do if you didn't come. Only that bag? The carriage is waiting." The station-master came up, touched his hat and made a remark. "Thank you," said Hammond. "As well as can be expected. Very sudden—yes; and very terrible.—Are you ready, Percival?"

The brougham was outside. "We shall be by ourselves," said Godfrey, who generally preferred the dog-cart. A minute later they were rolling smoothly along the road which Percival had traversed in such haste so short a time before.

"I was out," said young Thorne abruptly. "I didn't get your messages till between nine and ten last night."

"I said you were out," Hammond replied. "It was quite as well. You could not possibly have been in time, and could not have done any good."

"How—when did it happen?"

"Yesterday morning, quite early. In fact, it was all over before the first telegram was sent. But when they awoke Mrs. Middleton with the news—in a very foolish and inconsiderate manner, I fear—she absolutely refused to believe it, and they tell me her first cry was, 'Send for Percival—Godfrey will want Percival!' She wrote the message to you herself, but long before the man could have reached

Fordborough with it she must have known it was utterly useless. In fact, after the first shock she rallied and regained her calmness and good sense in a most surprising way. She feels it terribly, but when I got there she was quite herself."

"But how was it?" said Percival. "When I left my grandfather on Wednesday night he seemed quite well."

"Ah, that's the sad part of it. It was an accident."

"An accident?"

"Poison," said Hammond—"an overdose of some opiate or other. No: don't look so scared. There was no possibility of foul play. It is as clear as daylight."

(What Godfrey Hammond said was perfectly true. There *was* no foul play, and the death was as mere an accident as if Mr. Thorne had killed himself by falling down stairs. It was not really more terrible that his hand should falter than that his foot should slip. But there is always something ghastly in the idea of poison, and Percival's heart seemed to stand still for a moment.)

"He was late on Wednesday night," said Hammond. "He wrote a letter to Hardwicke and sent it to the post. After that he sat for a considerable time alone in the drawing-room, for Sissy was not well, and Mrs. Middleton was with her. When he went up stairs Turner noticed that he was more inclined to talk than usual. He said more than once that he had had a good deal of anxiety and trouble of late, but that now he hoped all would be right. Just as he was lying down he remarked that he had written to Mr. Hardwicke, and should drive to Fordborough the next day to see him. Turner says that his answer was, 'Oh indeed, sir, then I suppose Mr. Hardwicke is home again?' and that Mr. Thorne sat up with a startled look on his face, and said, 'Good God! is Hardwicke out?' The man was surprised, and told him that he had heard that Mr. Hardwicke had gone abroad somewhere, but he did not know for certain. Mr. Thorne lay down, and told him he might go, but Turner—who has the next room, you know—says he does not believe his master slept at all. He could hear him

tossing uneasily in his bed, till, being tired, he dropped off to sleep himself. He was awakened after a time by Mr. Thorne calling him. 'I can't sleep,' he said, 'and I can't afford to lose my night's rest, for I have something I must do to-morrow.' He told Turner to bring his little medicine-chest, and unlocked it with the key which hung with two or three others on his watch-chain. Turner was not surprised, as he occasionally took something of the kind, though not very often. He waited to carry it away again, but Mr. Thorne looked up with the bottle in his hand, and said the candle was too bright and hurt his eyes, and that he could see better with only the lamp which burned by his bedside. Turner was going to put it out when your grandfather added, 'And that dressing-room window rattles again: go and see if you can stop it.' He thinks he might have been five minutes at the window. When he looked back from the dressing-room door Mr. Thorne was lying down, with his face turned away from the light. He was quite still, and Turner was afraid of disturbing him with the candle or his footsteps, so he did not go in, but went round by the passage to his own room, and softly closed the door between the two. When he went in at about eight the next morning Mr. Thorne lay in precisely the same attitude—dead."

"How do they know it was—" Percival began.

"Turner saw how much there was in the bottle, and drew his own conclusions. The idiot need not have rushed to announce them to Mrs. Middleton, though. Your grandfather had lately been taking something for those headaches of his, and the man's theory is that in a fit of absence he poured out the same quantity of this. I don't know, I'm sure: I'm not in the habit of taking poisons myself, and don't understand anything about them. I locked everything up, or the whole household would have had their fingers in the bottle."

"There will be an inquest?"

"To-morrow. But there is no possible doubt as to the result." Godfrey took his chin between his fingers and stroked it

meditatively as he spoke. "I shall miss the old squire," he said after a pause, with a weight of meaning in the simple words. "But, thank God! it must have been a painless death."

"I—suppose so," was Percival's reply. He was wondering, even while he acquiesced, whether there had been a moment, the merest lightning-flash of time, during which the old man had been conscious of his blunder. If so, there had been a moment of suffering keener than death itself. And even if not, where was he now? Did he know that his delay had ruined his favorite? Did he, even in a new life, feel a pang of impotent anguish at the thought of what might have been? "For he cares still," said Percival to himself. And his heart went forth in deep tenderness toward the old man. "If you could only know!" he thought.

"Duncan telegraphed to me on his own account," Hammond went on, "and sent the message at the same time as the one to you, only his was more accurate. I got it about an hour before the train left. I always told—I always said that old butler was no fool, except about wine."

"Sissy?" said Percival.

The other looked grave: "Sissy is not at Brackenhill. She was far from well, and we feared it would be too much for her—the inquest, and funeral, and all. Laura Falconer came over yesterday afternoon and insisted on taking the poor child away. We persuaded her to go, and when she found we really thought it was best, I think she was not altogether unwilling."

Percival knew, by his sense of relief, that he had dreaded a meeting with Sissy in that horrible house of death.

"Horace? is he back again?"

"Yes, and Mrs. James too. If there were any conceivable piece of mischief that she could have on hand, I should say she was plotting something. They have sent off telegrams with mysterious secrecy, and they hold solemn councils in every corner. But as I can't see what they can be after, I suppose it is only Mrs. James Thorne's agreeable manner."

"Most likely," said Percival.

"Young Henry Hardwicke came over yesterday with the letter. His father has gone to see about some French property which a client of his wants to sell. He was not certain about the distance to the place, nor how long he would be there, so he only gave Henry his address at a Parisian hotel. We have written and telegraphed there, and have despatched a message to him at his final destination as well as the young fellow and I could make it out, but I am not at all sure of it."

"He has not answered, then? An awkward time for him to be away."

"Yes, but he had an appointment with the squire for next week—I suppose to settle things for you and Sissy. Your grandfather says nothing in the note except that he is coming over, and particularly wants to see Hardwicke that day, and to look at his will."

Percival sat for a moment in silent thought. This was the will which had been made before he ever saw his grandfather, and which the old man had been so anxious to alter. What was in it? It would not leave him Brackenhill nor Prior's Hurst—not so much as an inch of land. But was it possible that there would be nothing whatever for him? The squire had not said that, and it did not seem probable that he would have altogether passed over one who had done nothing to offend him when he thought so much of his family, and the Thornes were so few. But Percival was constrained to own that it was possible. A couple of days earlier he had feared dependence: now he feared beggary.

"This will put off your marriage," said Hammond suddenly.

"Yes," said Percival, still absorbed in thought. But a moment later he turned and looked at Godfrey. "No, it won't," he said. "There is no marriage to be put off. Look here, Godfrey: the day may come that I shall ask you to remember when it was I told you this. Sissy and I parted for ever before my grandfather's death. Do you understand? Aunt Harriet can bear witness to that. It was on Wednesday night. We thought it was

best. If any one was to blame, it was I. It is all over, really and finally. At this present moment Sissy no doubt believes that I am the master of Brackenhill. Knowing what she knew, and being well aware that my grandfather had no time to change anything after his talk with me, she can hardly think otherwise. But the Fordborough gossips will say she threw me over because I was poor. You must contradict that."

Hammond looked fixedly at him. "Ah!" he said. "But will you be poor?"

"Horace will have Brackenhill."

"Horace hardly thinks so."

"He will. At least unless there is some flaw in the will, which is not likely, as Hardwicke made it. Even then I should not dispute his claim. You had better not say anything to him, perhaps, till the will is read; but I know how it must be."

"Well," said Hammond, "suppose Horace does have Brackenhill—and perhaps he has the best right: may I say so?"

"I say so."

"Your grandfather could still provide for you, so that you would not be poor in any terrible sense of the word. Perhaps you may even be in easier circumstances than Horace, who will have that great house to keep up."

"Had my grandfather lived another day he would have provided for me," Percival replied. "As it is, the will that Hardwicke will produce is an old one, made five or six years since, before I ever set foot in Brackenhill."

Hammond was startled. "You don't mean it! You'll come badly off in that, my poor fellow," he said. "What! had he never altered his will? It is incredible—at his age! What folly, or—"

"No," Percival interrupted. "Don't say a word against him. Suppose he should be able to hear us?" he said, with a half smile at the fancy—a smile which ended in a sigh. "I wish he could: I should like to tell him something."

They were turning in at the gate. The old woman who opened it caught sight of Percival, and courtesied reverentially, mistaking a meteor for the rising sun. The young man answered with an ab-

sent nod. "I only tell you this that you may stand up for Sissy," he said as they went up the drive.

"That I will if needful," his companion replied. "But I'm sorry to hear this. Perhaps, after all, there may be no opportunity for any gossip. Are you quite sure—"

"That it is all over? Yes," said Percival.

Aunt Harriet met him with a face which was pathetic by reason of its very calmness. Her eyes were swollen and tired, and the pretty pink color in her cheeks had all retreated into the little veins. Her lips quivered suddenly now and then, as if a barbed arrow-head had been left in her wound. She looked doubtfully at Percival for a moment, but there was no mistaking the sadness and sympathy in his eyes; and, as if drawn by an invincible impulse, she put up her face that he might stoop and kiss her.

"God help you, Aunt Harriet!" he said.

But even as he spoke she drew her hands away and turned aside: "Don't talk to me just yet, Percival."

Her heart was torn with conflicting feelings. The young man who stood before her, his dark eyes eloquent with his desire to comfort her in her sorrow, was Godfrey's Percival, his favorite—was dearer to Godfrey than all the world beside. She had felt as if her heart were breaking as she drew her hands out of his soft, lingering clasp, and yet as if it were treachery to leave them there. For what had he done with his smooth words but make his way into her brother's heart and rob Horace of his inheritance? And what had he done with his eloquent eyes and clasping hands but win Sissy Langton and break her heart? Sissy had said that it was not his fault—that he was good; but how could Mrs. Middleton believe him guiltless when she knew how the poor child had loved him? Sissy would never have been false to him: it was not possible. And yet, after all, he was Godfrey's boy, and there was nothing now that she could do for Godfrey except what she did for Percival.

She dropped into her arm-chair again

and hid her face in her hands. When she looked up he was still standing there, silenced yet pleading. Presently he knelt on one knee before her. "Aunt Harriet," he said, "he was very good to me. I wish I could tell him so, but I can't, so I must tell you. I've no one now, you see."

She laid her trembling hand upon his head. He had no one now. That was true, but he would have Brackenhill, and friends would come in crowds. He had health and wealth, and all his life before him; and he would prosper and be popular, and go on his triumphant way, and find a new love and marry her, while her poor dying Horace and her broken-hearted darling passed away like shadows from his path. That was the future as she saw it in her grief, though it turned another face to Percival.

"Don't think me unkind," she said to Godfrey's boy, "but you must go away for a little while. I can't quite bear it yet: I'm not very strong."

Going out, he encountered Horace in the passage, looking terribly ill and worn—a shadow with feverishly brilliant eyes. Percival held out his hand. The other just touched it with his fingers, but he did even that under protest as it were, and because Godfrey Hammond was standing by and an open quarrel would be unbecoming in that house of death.

"This is very terrible," said Percival.

Horace uttered a murmur of assent and escaped.

His cousin looked after him with pained eyes. Then he turned to Godfrey Hammond. "I sha'n't be long at Brackenhill when its master is known, shall I?" said he.

"Who knows?" was the reply. "If it be as you say, he will have no cause for ill-will."

"He'll only think I tried to supplant him and failed. A year ago we were friends, but that can never be again. At times I almost fancy some one must have poisoned his mind against me."

"Mrs. James, perhaps," said Hammond. He would have attributed anything to Mrs. James.

They went out on the terrace. Percival sat on the stone balustrade, folded

his arms and surveyed Brackenhill from end to end as he had surveyed it the evening he saw it first. Then his grandfather had reproached him for his indifferent declaration that he liked old houses, as if this were no more to him than any other. Now his heart was heavy within him because it was so much more, and he was so soon to be banished from it.

"When is the funeral to be?" he asked.

"Monday."

"Monday! Isn't that very soon? Why, it—it was only on Thursday morning!"

"It is unusually early," said Hammond. "But Mrs. Middleton especially wishes it to be on Monday." He touched a spot of lichen on the stone with his slim forefinger, and eyed it thoughtfully. "Did you ever notice, Thorne, how great women are on domestic dates? They always know your birthday, and when you had the measles, or the precise day on which you made some one an offer, or fell down stairs, or were confirmed, or vaccinated, or came of age. Haven't you noticed?"

"Well?" said Percival.

"Well," said Hammond, trying hard to speak as if he scoffed at the little sentiment, and doing it in the tenderest voice and with his head turned away, because, though he cared for few people, he cared much for the squire and Aunt Harriet—"well, it seems that next Monday will be the anniversary of Mr. Thorne's wedding-day, fifty years ago. So Mrs. Middleton has the fancy that it shall be the day of his funeral—a sort of golden wedding, eh?—when those two shall be side by side once more. Very absurd, you know: what difference can it make? Of course the whole thing must seem doubly ridiculous to you: you can't get up any sentiment about your grandmother, can you, Thorne? Why, if she stepped out of a romance, she *is* your grandmother, and there's an end of it. I remember old Mrs. Thorne very well. She used to go about the house wrapped up in a drab shawl, and she read prayers to the poor squire and the servants, and had the toothache a good deal. When I came over from school

one day and he tipped me a sovereign, she saw it and said, 'Half a crown would have been ample, Godfrey.' I buttoned my jacket over it and ran away as hard as I could go, but I can hear her very tone at this moment."

"Perhaps," said Percival, "she wasn't quite the same fifty years ago. Perhaps she isn't quite the same now."

"Perhaps not. And, at any rate, Mrs. Middleton doesn't see any absurdity in it. She was Miss Harvey's bridesmaid. Half a century ago, to the very day, the bells were ringing over there, and the children throwing flowers down on the path, and people making speeches and fools of themselves; and Mrs. Middleton was a pretty girl, as merry as any of them. And now— It's horrible! He's to go back there to be buried, and she— By Jove, he's the lucky one now!"

"But he wasn't married at Brackenhill?" said Percival.

"He was, though. General Harvey lived in the old red house near the rectory. You can't remember it: it was pulled down twelve or fifteen years ago. I wonder if there are any others alive who were at that wedding? What a ghastly meeting it would be if they could come together! eh? I wonder why she couldn't let it rest, instead of forcing one to think of all this nonsense? But, being a woman, of course she couldn't. So Monday it is to be, and Monday it shall be, if the undertaker and all the milliners die of overwork, and even if Mrs. James doesn't get her crape and bugles in time."

So saying, Godfrey Hammond moved off, but Percival lingered on the terrace thinking of that golden wedding.

Willie Falconer rode over in the afternoon to inquire how they all were and to bring a note from Laura. Sissy was not excited or hysterical, but gentle, silent and depressed. "She took no notice when I spoke of sending over to Brackenhill," Laura wrote. "I said, 'I suppose Mr. Percival Thorne must have arrived by this time,' and then she answered, 'Yes, most likely.'—'Have you any message?' I asked. She only shook her head and laid her cheek on my hand. But

just now she has looked up and said, 'My love to Aunt Harriet.' I will write again to-morrow, and hope she may be more like herself. I am thankful to say she slept well last night."

Percival, who had begged the note from Mrs. Middleton, studied it as if he would compel it to yield every atom of its meaning. "She slept well." Poor Sissy! That Wednesday evening she had said, "I wonder if I shall sleep now?" He thanked God that that poor little boon was not denied her.

Young Falconer went off with a letter from Aunt Harriet. The poor old lady after writing it made up her mind to a painful effort and came down stairs. I think she feared some outbreak on Horace's part, and felt that her presence might control her favorite. She took her usual place when dinner-time came. There was a little difficulty among the rest of the party, and the two young men exchanged doubtful glances. Percival, who had given away Brackenhill, hesitated about resigning his right to his grandfather's chair. Neither so much wished to take the vacant place as he was unwilling to seem as if he thought his rival had the better claim.

"Godfrey Hammond, will you sit at the bottom of the table?" said Aunt Harriet in her gentle voice. "It will not seem so—so strange. You used to sit there sometimes, do you remember? A long time ago, when he was often out."

Percival dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief. He could yield the place, since it was not to Horace.

Hammond began to carve in his swift, methodical way. He had Mrs. James Thorne on his right, and Horace sat between his mother and Aunt Harriet. Percival was alone on the opposite side.

Mrs. James thought it her duty to be profoundly affected on this occasion. Her long-drawn and resounding sighs were heard from time to time, but she contrived to eat a very substantial dinner in the intervals. Hammond, even while he politely helped her, meditated profoundly on the restraints of habit and etiquette. They seemed to him extraordinarily pow-

erful. Mrs. James took out a handkerchief with a wide hem and wiped nothing out of her eyes with the greatest care. Hammond felt that if he had been a shade less civilized he must have got up and shaken her that moment.

Horace played languidly with his knife and fork, but could not eat. He broke the silence once with a question: "Has anything been heard of Hardwicke yet?"

"Nothing," said Hammond. "But I shall hear as soon as there is any news. Harry Hardwicke has promised to let me know at once."

"What is to be done if he doesn't come?"

"I haven't the least idea. He will come." Hammond's tone was that of one who checks a discussion, and the heavy silence settled down again.

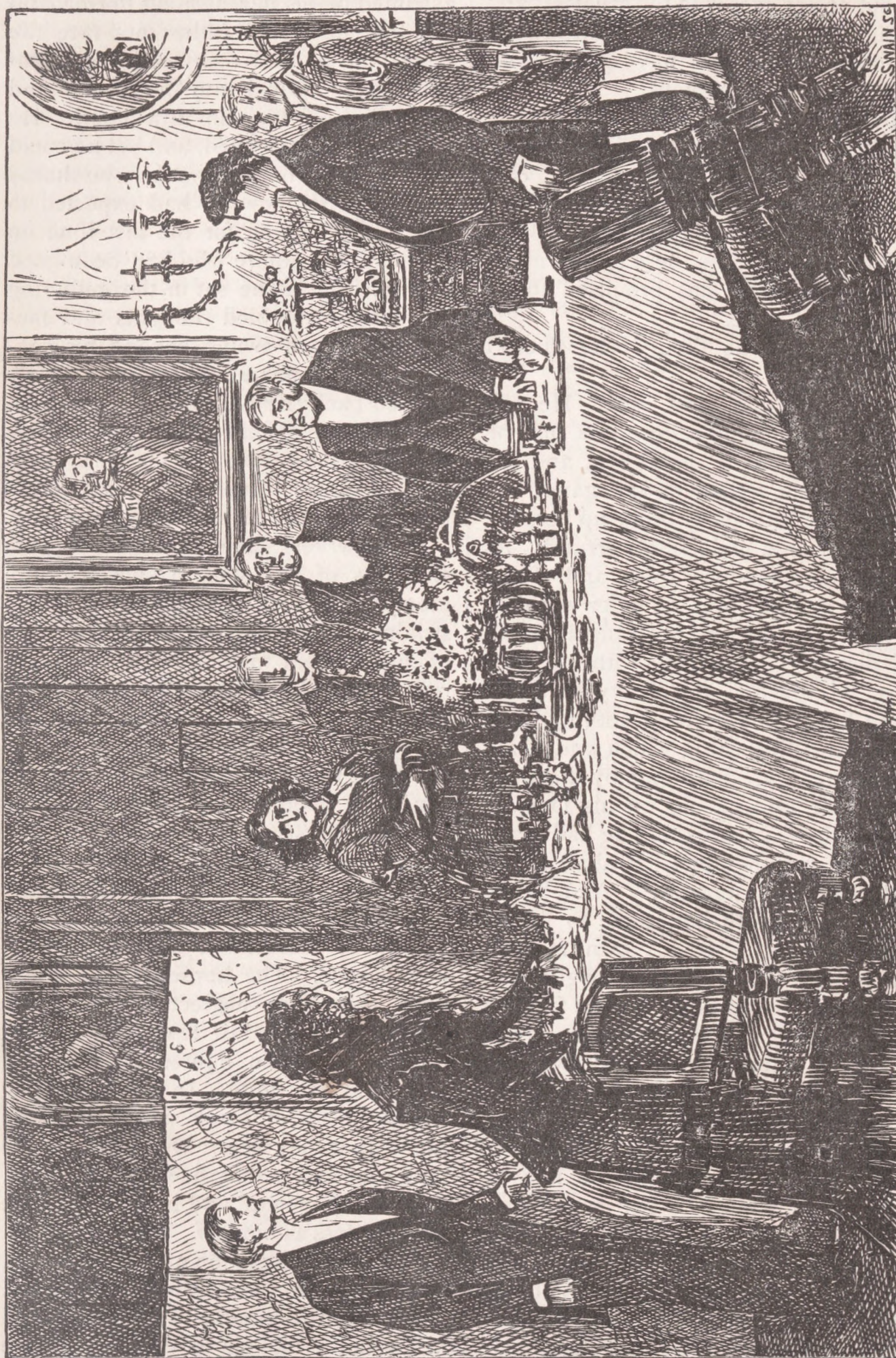
When the little party broke up Percival went away on a melancholy errand. As he entered a shadowy room and closed the door behind him, the outer world of warmth and light grew strangely small and distant. Advancing with noiseless steps, he touched the heavy hangings of the bed. Life seemed nothing but a dream, and this calm, which ended all, the one reality. Standing by the dead man's side and gazing on his face, he recalled the last words that he had heard that pale mouth utter: "It shall all be made right—to-morrow." And before the morrow Death had come to set all things straight after his own fashion. The young man, with his strongly-beating pulses, looked down on the features which were placid and not unhappy in their fixed expression, but drawn and cold, and like a delicately modelled wax mask rather than a face of flesh. And as he looked he longed to be able to ask, "Is all made right with you, now to-morrow has come?" Yet even while he longed to ask he shuddered. O God! the horror if those blue lips should unclose and answer him! He could not take his eyes from the corpse, and a chill ran slowly through his veins. He felt as if a cold breath were blowing on him from the outer darkness that girdles the little space of sun and shade and cheerful firelight which we call our life.

With a strong effort he tore himself away and hurried down stairs. He was ashamed of his unreasoning horror, and felt that he would rather not face the others till he had recovered his calmness, so he turned into the library and flung himself into an arm-chair. He was sincerely ashamed, and yet he could not help it. That was not how he should have felt, not how he had expected to feel, while looking for the last time on the poor old squire who had been good to him. But as he sat in the gathering twilight the troubled thoughts and fancies which had swung beyond his control in that momentary terror slowly swayed back to rest, and he asked himself why he should have expected his feelings to be after one pattern more than another. Others have no doubt known the same surprise and perplexity.

Many writers have described to us the emotions of the soul in supreme moments; and such descriptions are very striking. They are no doubt the fruit of undistracted meditation, and are enriched with the abundant adjectives of leisure. But when the crisis comes in hurry and confusion we are apt to discover with astonishment that it has not conferred upon us the power of talking in blank verse.

Percival propped his forehead on his hand and pondered drearily. Suddenly into his downward-bent eyes there came a flash of recognition and startled remembrance. The household work had been somewhat neglected during the confusion of the last few days, and as no fire had been lighted no one had looked at the grate. In the fender lay a little heap of black ashes. Thorne knew what they were. Overhead lay the man who had so long been master there, dead and impotent, and here lay his will, as powerless as himself. The young man felt that the destruction of that paper had cost him more than he had anticipated. The broken fragments of tinder mocked him with the thought of what might have been. But did he repent? No—from the bottom of his heart, no! It was a deed to be done without counting the cost.

All passed off very smoothly at the inquest, as Hammond had foretold. Turner gave his evidence clearly and well: there was no need to call Mrs. Middle-



"GODFREY HAMMOND, WILL YOU SIT AT THE BOTTOM OF THE TABLE?"—Page 156.

ton, who had literally nothing to tell, and there was a general feeling of regret and respectful sympathy. In spite of his pride and his perverse spirit of contradiction, Godfrey Thorne had gained a certain place in his neighbors' lik-

ing. He never achieved popularity, but he had ruled at Brackenhill so long that people took him for granted, and only grumbled at his freaks as they grumbled at the weather or anything else that was entirely beyond their control. And every one liked his sister.

She was wonderfully relieved when the dreaded hour was over, and began to move about the house with mournful activity and to take an interest in the arrangements which had hitherto been left altogether in Hammond's hands. Other cares divided her thoughts with these sombre preparations. On Sunday afternoon she came down stairs with her bonnet on, and looked for Percival. He was in the library, reading the *Saturday Review*. He looked up when the old lady put her hand on his shoulder. "Will you give me your arm?" she said: "I want to take a turn in the garden."

Pacing to and fro, with little steps, on the sunny side of the clipped yew-hedge, Aunt Harriet opened her heart to her companion. "Percival," she said, "I am so sorry about you and Sissy—so very sorry! I don't know what to say. I'm too old to meddle in your love-affairs"—the feeling with which she had first greeted the news recurred to her—"a generation too old at the very least. But—"

"I don't know that," said Percival. "When people talk of second childhood they usually mean something unpleasant, but they needn't. We young folks sometimes feel as if the middle-aged people were the furthest away and such as you were coming gently back to us. They have lost their illusions, you see, and are hard and embittered, while you—"

"Do you think illusions grow again for us?" said the old lady, looking up with a smile of tender scorn.

"No: if they are illusions there can be no resurrection of the dead for them. Only truths live. But there has been time with you for flowers to grow upon their graves."

Percival, burdened with the difficulties of his position, was not sorry thus to divert an embarrassing conversation into

idle meanderings round the subject of youth and old age. It is a subject concerning which we almost all have something to say, for we must be young indeed if we have no backward glances which love to dwell for a moment on the past.

But Aunt Harriet was not to be turned from her purpose. "I don't know much about any flowers growing now," she said. "And it isn't the right time to be thinking of a wedding, with our dead still in the house. But what can I do? For if you stand apart too long, you will never come together again. And Godfrey was so pleased that you two should marry! He wished it so. What can I do?"

Percival dropped his former manner in a moment, and came abruptly to the point, since what he would have avoided was inevitable. "What can I do?" he said gravely.

"Tell me what is wrong," Aunt Harriet pleaded. "May I judge what you can do? Afterward you can decide for yourself what you *will* do."

"It is impossible for me to tell you all," he replied. "Sissy and I differed about something. We didn't quarrel, you understand: we simply looked on the matter in question in a totally different light. I was grieved, but I did not see why we should not remain as we were and live down our misunderstanding. Sissy, however, asked me to release her from her promise. I did so—God knows with what reluctance. But since then the more I think of it the more I fear that Sissy was right."

Aunt Harriet took her hand from his arm.

"Ah? You think this unsatisfactory, and me cold?" said Percival. "You may understand me better some day. Or you may not."

"I couldn't understand you less."

"I can't help talking in riddles. Aunt Harriet, when any one you love is dying, and lingers very long in pain, you would give your life that he should live, and yet when death comes it is a relief, and you know that it is best. I can't bear to look forward to my life now. I used to look

forward to a happy future with Sissy. Now that future is dead, and has left me very lonely; but it is better that it should be so than that it should die slowly and painfully, as I fear it would have done."

"But why? why? For she loved you, and you loved her?"

Percival bent his head, and the solemn gesture was more than a thousand words. "Are you sure she loved me?" he said after a pause. "I think not. She fancied she did, poor child! but she was afraid of me. I felt as if she stabbed me when she looked up at me with her frightened eyes. I did not mean to be hard on her: I meant to be very gentle, but even my gentleness was rough and stern to her, it seems. When she shrank away from me and begged for her freedom, what could I do but give it back to her? I would have given her my life, only it wouldn't have been much to the purpose."

"But are you sure—? It was so hasty!" faltered Aunt Harriet.

"Shall I tell you what makes me sure, now that the first shock has passed and I can understand it better?" said Percival gloomily. "When we were going to part, when I had yielded and she was free, she put her arms about my neck and kissed me. She wouldn't have let me hold her and kiss her unless she were very certain of her freedom—unless she knew that I could never win her back again. And she cried, my poor darling! I felt her tears. She wouldn't have been so grieved for my pain without being quite sure there was no help for it."

Aunt Harriet looked at the little pebbles at her feet. She was silenced, perplexed, distressed.

"Perhaps in a little while you may see that it is best as it is, in other ways," said Percival. "At any rate, could anything be so dreadful as that we should marry, and that I should find that I couldn't make her happy, and know that I had had the doubt in my heart even on our wedding-day? As I should have."

"I don't know what to think," said Aunt Harriet.

"Wait," Percival replied—"wait till this sorrowful time has gone by a little. See if Sissy is not brighter and happier for her liberty—if she does not regain her strength and spirits."

"But Sissy was ill before her engagement to you. That can't be it."

"Wait and see," he continued. "If she does, you will know that my fear was the truth—that she mistook her feelings toward me, and did not love me."

"If she is happier. And if not?"

"What can I do?" he replied. "I have given her all I could; and it was very little use, I think. Here is Hammond coming."

Godfrey, with his eye-glass up, came peering round the wall of green. "Harry Hardwicke is here," he announced as he approached. "He has had a telegram from his father. He didn't get our second message, evidently—I doubted if it would find him—for he heard nothing till he got back to Paris, after a longer stay than he expected."

"When will he be back?"

"He comes by the last train to-night, so he will be here in good time to-morrow."

"Thank Heaven!" Mrs. Middleton exclaimed. "I was very anxious." She released Percival as she spoke, dismissed him with a sad little smile, and followed him with her eyes.

"Godfrey Hammond," she said, "I'm troubled about him."

"About Percival? Why?"

"About Percival and Sissy."

Hammond was studying a twig which he had broken as he came. "I know," he said, looking obliquely at her. "But wait till to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow?"

"We are all anxious enough for to-day," Godfrey replied. "Percival's marriage couldn't be an immediate question: *don't* take up an unnecessary trouble just when you are overweighted."

"It's you who have done everything and taken all the trouble," said the old lady, looking up at him. "What with the letters, and Robinson" (Robinson was the undertaker), "and the *Times*, and the servants' mourning, and that

dreadful inquest, I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't," said Hammond. "I didn't do it for the sake of thanks. I did it for the sake of Auld Lang Syne, eh?—for your sake and *his*, and because I'm a meddlesome fellow who thinks he could manage creation better than anybody else. We know each other of old, don't we?"

Mrs. Middleton wept silently, and held his hand.

"Better?" he said after a minute or two, laying his other hand so lightly on hers that the momentary touch was barely a caress.

"You are so good—so good!" Aunt Harriet whispered. "It would have been such a load on my mind—the mourning and all!"

"Oh, I made Mrs. James help me," said Hammond. "Her knowledge went a good way, with a little of my common sense."

They were walking toward the house. "Don't be hard on Horace," said Mrs. Middleton suddenly. "Oh, don't be hard on my poor boy, for it's very hard on him already."

"I'm not hard on him. But, to tell you the truth, Horace rather avoids me, so it isn't very easy to be cordial. I don't know why he should. Still, I don't forget that both the boys are in a difficult position."

"Both?"

"Both," Godfrey repeated firmly. "I hardly know how one could be just to their respective claims. But you must find out how to hold the balance fairly, for they both love you."

I do not think any of the party slept soundly that Sunday night. Percival did not. He lay seeking through the shadows for the first faint outline of the window which would show that the brief summer darkness was drawing to a close. And as he lay there he tried hard to realize what seemed so incredible to him, that less than a week had done it all. Six days earlier he had been busy with the preparations for his marriage. It was on the Tuesday that he had called on Godfrey Hammond and heard of the

Lisle failure. Nonsense! It was absurd. Why, it must be months since Lisle failed! And yet he knew he heard of it on Tuesday night. Then on Wednesday he came down to Brackenhill, and Addie Blake was in the train, and made a mystery of something or other—talked in Gunpowder-Plot fashion about some silly secret of hers which could not matter to any one. And he told his grandfather of his loss, and made up his mind that he was to carry the Old Man of the Sea on his shoulders from that time forward. Percival hated to recall this feeling. He knew that it was not altogether unjust, yet now it seemed a horrible thing to have had such a thought of the poor old squire, who had loved him and who was dead. That evening he saw Sissy, and they kissed each other and parted. Good Heavens! was it only four days since he said good-bye to Sissy? Or was it four years? Or four centuries? Thursday he was at Rookleigh. Where was Rookleigh? In some other planet surely. The sleepy little town, with its formal trees, its white birds, its cloudless blue sky, came before his mind in wonderful fullness of detail. It was most vivid, yet most unreal, as if a man should have passed just one day amid the familiar scenery of an old willow-patterned plate, should have walked over the queer little bridge we know so well, should have rested in the mansion beneath the heavily-fruited tree, and then came suddenly back to his English life again. So clear and so incredible was that day to Percival. And thinking of it, he fell into a light, uneasy sleep, and dreamed that it was his grandfather's wedding-day, and that the ceremony was to be performed in Rookleigh church. But all was anxiety and confusion, for the bride was not ready and the time was very short. Percival thought that he held Godfrey Hammond by the sleeve in the lych-gate, and tried to warn him that the Shadwells' vault was not safe. Godfrey, however, laughed, and said it was all right: he had put the squire down there to wait till the bride should arrive, and the best-man was standing on the entrance-stone to keep him from coming up till they

were ready. Percival might have been astonished at such a method of disposing of the bridegroom, but at that moment he remembered that it was his wedding-day too, and where was Sissy? And then followed a nightmare-hunt for her high and low. It was only ended by a sudden certainty—how acquired Percival could not tell—that Sissy was with the squire in the Shadwells' awful vault. He was not far from waking when he came to this point, and all the hideous horror of the thought flashed upon him. He could not see Sissy, he could not get

at her, and yet her frightened eyes drove him to despair. He started up in bed to find himself still at Brackenhill, with the cloudless sky glowing through his window, the June sun crowning the tree-tops with gold and the breezes softly whispering among the roses outside. The horrible fancy vanished. But surely it was not all a dream: something was going to happen. Who was to be married that morning? With a quick grasp at realities Percival remembered that this was the squire's golden wedding-day.



CHAPTER XXXI.
WHY NOT LOTTIE?



IT was all over. The neighborhood had paid due honor to Godfrey Thorne. Old Garnett, who was kept at home by his gout, had written a letter of condolence to Mrs. Middleton, and expressed his deep regret at his enforced absence. She was pleased with the letter. She did not care for Dick Garnett,

but he had known her brother all his life. She would not have been so pleased, perhaps, had she seen old Dick grinning and showing his fierce old teeth as he wrote it: "Ought to have been there—believe I was his best man fifty years ago. But half a century takes the shine out of most things—and people too." He shrugged his shoulders, eyed the last sentence he had written, and perceiving a little space at the end of a line, put in an adjective to make it rather warmer. "Won't show," he said to himself—"looks very natural. Lord! what a farce it all is! Fifty years ago there was Thorne, like a fool, worshipping the very ground Fanny Harvey trod on, and a few years later he wasn't particularly sorry to put her safe underneath it. Wonderful coal-scuttle of a bonnet she wore that wedding-day, to be sure! And I was best man!" Dick chuckled at the thought. "I shouldn't look much like best man now. Ah, well! I mayn't be

best, but I'm a better man than old Godfrey to-day, anyhow." (And so, no doubt, for this world's affairs, Richard Garnett was, on the principle that "a living dog is better than a dead lion.") "And the candlemaker's daughter begins her reign, for that poor lad will never marry. Upon my word, I believe I'm a better man than Master Horace now. And I'm not likely to play the fool with physic-bottles, either: I know a little better than *that*." No, Aunt Harriet would not have liked Garnett's train of thought as he folded and addressed the letter which pleased her. And yet the old fellow meant the best he could.

And now it was all over, and Brackenhill would know Godfrey Thorne no more. But for that one day he was still all-powerful, for they had met to hear his will read.

Horace sat by the table with an angry line between his brows, and balanced a paper-knife on his finger. He tried to appear composed, but a shiver of impatience ran through him more than once, and the color came and went on his cheek. His mother was by his side, controlling her face to a rigidly funereal expression. But the effort was evident.

Godfrey Hammond said to himself, "Those two expect the worst. And if the worst comes, if Percival is mistaken and Horace is cut off with just a pittance, we shall see what Hunting Harry's temper really is. We may have an unpleasant quarter of an hour, but it will give us a vivid idea of the end of the millennium, I fancy."

Aunt Harriet was unfeignedly troubled and anxious.

Percival was rather in the background. Sitting on one chair, he laid his folded arms on the back of another and rested his chin on his wrists. In this attitude he gazed at Hardwicke with the utter calm of an Assyrian statue. He felt his pulses throbbing, and it seemed to him as if his anxiety must betray itself. But

it did not. If you have a little self-restraint and presence of mind you can affect to have much. Percival had that little.

Just before Hardwicke began to read Mrs. James leant toward her son and whispered with an air of mystery. He answered with a short and sullen nod.

Hardwicke read clearly but monotonously. The will was dated four days after Alfred Thorne's death—not only before Percival came to Brackenhill, but before any overtures had been made to him. Mrs. Middleton came first with a legacy of ten thousand pounds and a few things which the dead man knew she prized—their mother's portrait and one or two memorials of himself. Sissy had five thousand pounds and a small portion of the family jewels, which were very splendid. His godson, Godfrey Hammond, had three pictures and a ring, all of considerable value, and two or three other things, which, though of less importance, had been looked upon as heirlooms by successive generations of Thornes. Hammond perfectly understood the wilful pride and remorseful pangs with which that bequest was made.

Then came small legacies to old friends. Duncan the butler and one or two of the elder servants had annuities, and the others were not forgotten. Two local charitable institutions had a hundred pounds each. By this time Horace was white to his very lips and drawing his breath painfully. Percival preserved an appearance of calm, but he could feel his strong, irregular heart-throbs as he leant against the chair.

The lawyer went on to read the words which gave Brackenhill to Horace for his life. If he died and left no son to inherit the estate, it was to go to Percival Thorne. But unless Horace died first, and died childless, Percival would not take sixpence under his grandfather's will.

It was a heavy blow, and his lips and hands tightened a little as he met it. He had known that the great prize was for his cousin, but he had fancied that there might be some trifling legacy for

him. He would have been more thankful than words could say for half the annuity which was left to the butler. The remembrance of that paper which but for him would have been all powerful rose vividly before his eyes. Did he repent now that he was certain of the greatness of the sacrifice? Again from the bottom of his heart he answered, No. But even while Hardwicke read the words which doomed him to beggary it almost seemed to young Thorne as if the wrinkled waxen face and shrunken figure must suddenly become visible in the background to protest—as if a dead hand must be laid on that lying will which was itself more dead than the newly-buried corpse. Even in that bitter moment Percival was sorry for the poor old squire.

Hardwicke finished, and thought it all very well. He did not pity the young fellow opposite him who had listened so intently and now was looking thoughtfully into space. The lawyer summed up Percival's position in his own mind thus:

He had an income of his own, amount unknown, but as during Alfred Thorne's life it had sufficed for both, it must be more than enough to support the son.

He was engaged to Sissy Langton. Her father had left her at least eight hundred pounds a year, besides which there were all the accumulations of a long minority and this legacy. Mr. Hardwicke thought that the united incomes would be more than fifteen hundred pounds a year.

There were expectations too. Mrs. Middleton was rich, and though some of her property would revert to her husband's family, Hardwicke knew that she had saved a considerable sum. He had no doubt that those savings and her brother's ten thousand pounds would go to Sissy, and consequently to Percival.

And lastly he looked at the new owner of Brackenhill. No, Mr. Hardwicke did not pity Mr. Percival Thorne.

All these thoughts had flashed through his mind as he folded the paper and laid it down. Mrs. Middleton broke the silence. "But Percival—" she exclaimed

in utter bewilderment: "I don't understand. What does Percival have?"

"Nothing," said the young man quickly, lifting his head and facing her with a brave smile.

"Nothing? It isn't possible! It isn't right!"

"That will was made before ever I came here. It doesn't mean any unkindness to me, for he didn't know me."

"But did he never make another?—Horace!—Oh, Mr. Hardwicke, *you* know Godfrey never meant this! That was what his letter was about, then?"

"He intended to make some change, no doubt," said Hardwicke.

"Perhaps Mr. Percival Thorne would like to dispute the will." It was evident that Mrs. James perfectly comprehended the position. Aunt Harriet looked helplessly at her boy, unable to understand his silence.

Horace, though unconscious of the glance, rose suddenly to his feet. "I want to understand," he began in a high thin voice—an unnatural voice—which all at once grew hoarse.

"Yes—what?" said Hardwicke, looking up at the young man, who rested both his quivering hands on the table to support himself. All eyes were turned to the one erect figure.

"That"—Horace nodded at the will—"that makes me master here, eh?"

"Undoubtedly," Hardwicke replied, wondering whether Horace was unusually slow of comprehension.

"Nothing can alter it?" said Horace. "I may do what I please in everything? I want to be sure."

"You can't sell it, if you mean that," said the lawyer. "Didn't you understand? You have only—"

"I know—I know that." The interruption was hasty, as if the speaker would not be reminded of an unpleasant truth.

Hardwicke's eyes rested on the two hands which were pressed on the table. They were painfully weak and white. "You are master here," he said gently. "Certainly. Your grandfather has made no conditions whatever. Brackenhill is yours for your life."

Horace looked fixedly at him, and half

opened his lips as if to speak, but no sound came. It was so evident that he had something to say that the others waited in strained anxiety, and no one spoke except Mrs. James. She laid her fingers on his and said, "Now—why not now?"

"Leave me to manage it," he answered, and drew his hand away, provoking a lofty "Oh, *very* well!" He walked hurriedly to the hearth-rug and stood in the master's place with an air of having taken possession. Hardwicke moved his chair a little, so as to look sideways at the new squire: Hammond put up his glass.

Mrs. James was like a living explanation of the text, "As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead." Though she was sulky and persistently silent, there was a lurking triumph in her eyes, and it was easy to see that she listened eagerly for the words which seemed to die on her son's lips. He glanced quickly round, stepped back, and rested his elbow on the chimney-piece so awkwardly that a small china cup fell and was shivered to atoms on the hearth.

"Oh, Horace!" exclaimed Aunt Harriet.

"It's mine," said the young man with a nervous little laugh. "And—since Brackenhill is mine too—it is time that my wife should come home."

There was a startled movement and a sudden exclamation of surprise, though it would have been impossible to say who moved or spoke.

"Your wife! Do you mean that you are going to be married?" said Hardwicke.

"No. I mean that I am married," Horace replied. "Oh, it's all right enough. I took care of that. You shall know all about it."

"But how? when? who is she?" Mrs. Middleton had her hand on his arm and was stammering in her eagerness. "Oh, my dear boy, why didn't we know?"

"Because Mrs. Horace Thorne was Miss Adelaide Blake," said Hammond decisively.

Horace turned upon him and said "No," and he was utterly confounded.

"But who, then? Tell us."

Horace looked at Percival, the only one who had been silent. "Why not Lottie?" he said, and the tone was full of meaning.

Percival stared at him for a moment, and then leapt to his feet. "It isn't true!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed! And why not?" said Horace. "If I may ask—"

"Lottie do anything underhand! Lottie! It can't be true!"

"You're very kind, but Lottie doesn't want your championship, thank you," said Horace with an angry sneer. "No doubt you find it very incredible that she should prefer mine."

"Oh, by all means, if it suits her," scoffed Percival, and sat down again, feeling stunned, robbed and duped.

"And as to anything underhand—" Horace began fiercely.

Aunt Harriet, scared by the menacing clash of words, uttered a faint little cry.

"Percival! Horace!" said Godfrey Hammond, "you forget what day this is—you forget Mrs. Middleton. For God's sake don't quarrel before her!—Horace, is this really true? Is Lottie your wife?"

"Yes," said the young man, turning quickly toward him: there was a sudden light of tenderness in his glance—"since last November." He paused, and then added softly, "the third," as if the date were something sacred. "Hammond, you know her: you know how young she is—only eighteen this month. If you choose to blame any one, blame me. And I'm not ashamed of what I've done." He looked defiantly round. "I'm proud of having won her; and as to my having concealed it, I ask you, in common fairness, what else could I do? My grandfather used to be very good to me, but of late he was set against me." A quick glance at Percival, who smiled loftily. "Whatever I did was wrong. If I'd told him I was going to marry a princess, it wouldn't have satisfied him. Since this time last year I've hardly had a good word. I've been watched and lectured, and treated like an outsider here, in my own home. You know it's

true, and you know to whom I owe it. I never expected to have my rights: I thought my grandfather would have no peace till I was driven out of Brackenhill. And even now I can't understand how it is that I am master here." Percival smiled again, to himself this time. "But Lottie was willing to share my poverty—God bless her!—and I won't let an hour go by without owning my wife. I should be ashamed of myself if I did."

Horace paused, not unconscious of the weakness of his position, yet more like the Horace of old days to look at—flushed, with a happy loyalty in his eyes and his proud head high in the air.

"No one will blame you for marrying the girl you loved," said Percival in his strong voice. "That is exactly what my father did. It is true that you manage matters in a different way, and naturally the result is different." He rose. "I prefer my father's way—result and all." And with a bow to the assembled company young Thorne walked out of the room.

Horace looked round to see how the attack was received—at Aunt Harriet, who was wiping away the quick coming tears; at Hardwicke, who was looking at the door through which Percival had vanished; at Hammond, who came forward a step or two. "I ordered a dog-cart to come over from Fordborough for me," he said. "If you will allow me I will ring and have it brought round."

"You are going?" said Horace.

"We shall just catch the four-o'clock train very comfortably if we go now," Godfrey replied. "Thorne will prefer going by that."

"I see: you take his part. Very well. I suppose sooner or later you must choose between us: as well now as later." Horace rang the bell.

"Horace," said Hammond, dropping his voice, yet speaking in the same tone of authority he had used once before that day, "for the first time in your life Mrs. Middleton is your guest. If you have a spark of right feeling—and you have more than that—you will not make her position here more painful than it must be. We will defer all discussion: there

must be a truce while she is here.—My dog-cart," he said over his shoulder to the servant. "It was to come from Fordborough. At once.—Keep out of the way ten minutes hence when your cousin goes," he added to Horace: "it will be best."

The young squire bent his head in sulky acquiescence.

"I shall take Percival with me," said Hammond to Mrs. Middleton as he went by. "He wants to be off, I know, and I shall be of more use with him than here."

He found Percival crushing his things into his little portmanteau and in hot haste to get away from Brackenhill.

"I'm going by the four train," Hammond remarked, "and I've told them you'll drive with me."

"In one of *his* carriages?" said young Thorne, looking up with furious eyes. "No, thank you: I'll walk."

"If you jumped out of that window you wouldn't have to go down his staircase," said Hammond.

"Oh, if you came here to—" began the young man, tugging at a strap.

"I came here to ask you to drive with me in the dog-cart from the Crown. It's no use pulling a strap *much* past the tightest hole. Come, you are not going to quarrel with me?"

"I'm a fool," said Percival. "I shall feel it all in a minute or two, I suppose. Just now I only feel that everything belongs to the man who has duped me, and every breath I draw is choking me."

"I understand," returned Hammond. "Percival, Mrs. Middleton is coming: I hear her step. For her sake—to-day—Thorne, you will not break her heart?"

The old lady was knocking at the half-open door. "Come in," said Percival in a gentle voice. His portmanteau was strapped, and he rose as she entered. "Come to say good-bye to me, Aunt Harriet? I'm off, you see."

"Oh, Percival, I can't understand it!" she exclaimed. "Horace married—*married!* And you going away like this! It is like a dream."

"So it seems to me," said the young man.

"And one of those Miss Blakes! Oh

dear! what would Godfrey have said? Oh, Percival, he never meant this!" She had her hand to her forehead as she spoke.

"No," said Percival. "But don't fret about me: I shall do very well."

"But it isn't right. Oh, I don't know what to say or think, I am so bewildered. Perhaps Horace has hardly had time to think yet, has he?" she said faintly. "He will do something, I'm sure—"

"He mustn't—don't let him! I can hold my tongue if I'm let alone. But if he insults me—" said Percival. "Aunt Harriet, for God's sake, *don't* let him offer me money."

"Ah!" in an accent of pain. "But my money! Percival, do you want any? It's a good thing, as *he* said, that Mr. Lisle didn't fail before you came into yours, but if you want any—"

"But I don't," said Percival. "As you say, it's a good thing I have some of my own." He had his fingers in his waistcoat pocket, and was wondering which of the coins that he felt there would prove to be gold. It was an important question. "Don't vex yourself about me, Aunt Harriet. Kiss me and say good-bye: there isn't much time, is there? Tell Sissy—" he stopped abruptly.

"What?" said the old lady.

"Tell her— I don't know. You'll let me hear how she is. You've been very good to me, Aunt Harriet. It's best as it is about Sissy, isn't it, seeing how things have turned out?"

He caught up his luggage and went quickly out, but only to turn and pause irresolutely in the doorway.

"I'll not say anything about Horace: we are best apart. But Lottie! I liked Lottie: we were very good friends when she was a school-girl. She is very young still. Perhaps she didn't understand. I ought to say this, because you never knew her, and I did."

And having said it, he went away with a light on his sombre face. Mrs. Middleton looked up at Hammond with streaming eyes and shook her head: "I shall never like that girl: I shall never have anything to do with her. Godfrey was right."

"In what way?"

"Percival was his favorite always."

"I'll look after him," said Hammond; and with a quick pressure of her hand he followed the young man down stairs.

As they drove away Percival sat erect and grave, with a face as darkly still as if it were moulded in bronze. He went away from the dear old house without one backward glance: Horace might be looking out. He never spoke, and when they reached the station he took his ticket and got into the carriage without the least reference to Hammond, who followed him quietly. There was no one else with them. The silence was unbroken till they drew near their journey's end, when Thorne took out his ticket and examined it curiously. "I wonder if I shall ever see another?" he said.

"Another what?"

"First-class ticket. I ought to have gone third."

"You get an opportunity of studying character, no doubt. But I think this is better to-day," said Hammond.

Percival was silent for a moment. Then he spread all his money on his open hand and eyed it: "What do you think of that for a fortune, eh, Godfrey?"

Godfrey glanced at the little constellation of gold and silver coins. "Wants a little more spending," he said. "Two-pence halfpenny is the mystic sum which turns to millions. So Lisle has swindled you, has he? I thought as much."

Percival nodded: "Keep my secret. They sha'n't say that I lived on my grandfather first, and then on Aunt Harriet or Sissy. They may find it out later, and welcome if I have shown them that I can do without them all."

"Ah yes," said Hammond a little vaguely. "Here we are."

CHAPTER XXXII.

LOTTIE WINS.

PERCIVAL had not been wrong about Lottie: she had at any rate only partially understood what she was doing. The poor child had been bitterly humiliated by the discovery that he did not

love her, and felt that she was disgraced for life by her ill-judged advance. The feeling was high-flown and exaggerated no doubt, but one hardly expects to find all the cool wisdom of Ecclesiastes in a brain of seventeen. Lottie, flying from Percival's scorn as she supposed, was ready for any desperate leap. What wonder that she took one into Horace's open arms! How could she find a better salve for wounded pride than by captivating the man who had passed her by as nothing but a child, and who had been, as she would have said, "much too great a swell to take any notice of *her*"? He had dangled in a half-hearted fashion after Addie, and had given himself airs. Wounded vanity had attracted him to Lottie, but, smitten by sudden passion, he wooed her hotly, with an eagerness which startled even himself. How could she be unconscious of the difference and of her triumph? Percival Thorne, who had slighted her, should see her reigning at Brackenhill!

Proud, pleased, grateful, excited, dizzy with success, Lottie was swept away by the torrent of mingled feelings. Her sorrow for her father's death was violent, but not lasting. She could not feel his loss for any length of time, she had always been so much more her mother's child. Even during her mourning there was something of romance in Horace's letters of comfort, for Horace, who had always been the laziest correspondent in the world, wrote ardent letters to Lottie, and used all the hackneyed yet ever fresh expedients for transmitting them which have been bequeathed to us by generations of bygone lovers. There were meetings too, more romantic still. No one is so sentimental as the man who is startled out of a languid scorn of sentiment. He does not know where to stop. Horace would have been capable of serenading Lottie if Mrs. Blake would only have slept on the other side of the house.

Addie was unconscious of the fiery romance which went on close at hand. She felt that the languid attentions which she had prized were fading away and would never ripen to anything more. Her sorrow for her father's death was deeper

than Lottie's, and while it was fresh she hardly thought of Horace Thorne's coldness, except as a part of the general dreariness of life, and did not attempt to seek out its cause. Even Mrs. Blake never for a moment expected the revelation which was made to her near the beginning of October.

It was Lottie who told her, coming to her one night with a white face of agony and resolution.

Horace was dangerously ill. He had been ill before, but this was something altogether different. The cold which led to such alarming results had been caught in one of his secret expeditions to see Lottie. She had been forced to keep him waiting, and a chilly September rain had drenched him to the skin. He had gone away in his wet clothes, had tried to pretend that there was nothing amiss with him, and had gone out the next day in order to be able to attribute his cold to a ride in the north-east wind. Since that time Lottie had had three letters—the first a gallant little attempt at gayety and hopefulness; the second, after a considerable interval, depressed and anxious. They had ordered him abroad. "I am sure they think badly of me," he wrote, "though I'll cheat the grave yet—if I can. But how am I to live through the winter in some horrible hole of a place without my darling? Suppose I get worse instead of better, and die out there, and never see you again—never once?" And so on for a page of forebodings. Lottie's fondness for him, fanned by pity and remorse—was it not for her that he had risked his life?—flamed up to passion. They say that a woman always puts the real meaning of her letter into the postscript. I don't know how that may be, but I do not think she would ever fail to give full weight to any postscript she might receive. Horace's postscript was, "After all, I've a great mind to stay in England and chance it."

Lottie was terrified. She replied, wildly entreating him to go, and vowing that they should meet again and not be parted. She did not yet know what she would do, but— Then followed a few notes of music roughly dashed in.

He was puzzled. He tried the notes furtively on the piano, but they told him nothing. That day, however, there came to his mother's house a girl with whom he had had one of his numerous flirtations in bygone days. He asked her to play to him, and then to sing, hanging over the piano meanwhile, and thrilling her with his apparent devotion and with the melancholy which reminded her of the fate which threatened him. When she had finished her song he said, "But you'll sing me one more, won't you? I sha'n't have the chance again, you know." He looked down as he spoke and struck the notes which haunted him. "Do you know what that is?" he asked. "It has been going in my head all day, and I can't put a name to it."

She tried it after him. "What is it?" she said: "I ought to remember," and paused, finger on lip. Horace's eager eyes flashed upon hers, when she suddenly exclaimed, "I know. It's one of Chappell's old songs;" and, dashing her hands victoriously upon the keys, she sang "Love will find out the way."

"Ah!" said Horace, and stood erect in a glow of passion and triumph. He remembered himself enough to ask again for one more song, but when, with a wistful tremor in her voice, she said, "This? you used to like this," he assented, without an idea what it was, and dropped into the nearest arm-chair to ponder Lottie's message. He was quite unconscious that the girl at his side was singing "O Fair Dove! O Fond Dove!" with an earnestness of meaning, a pathos and a power, which she never attained before or since. But he was sorry when she stopped, for he had to come out of a most wonderful castle in the air and say "Thank you." When she went away he looked vaguely at her and let her hand fall, as was only natural. How we listen for the postman when we are longing for a letter and sick with hope deferred! But who thinks of him when he has dropped it into the box and is going down the street? Horace felt almost sure as he said good-bye that Love *had* found out the way.

And his next note sent Lottie to her mother.

Mrs. Blake was utterly confounded when her younger daughter announced that she was engaged to Horace Thorne. "It was no good saying anything," said Lottie frankly, "for his old wretch of a grandfather wouldn't think we were good enough to marry into *his* family, and I dare say he would go and leave all his money to Percival if Horace thwarted him. So we thought we would wait. People can't live *very* much longer when they are seventy-seven, can they? At least they do sometimes, I know," Lottie added, pulling herself up. "You see them in the newspapers sometimes in their ninety-eighth or ninety-seventh year, I've noticed lately. But I'm sure it will be very wicked if he lives twenty years more. And now Horace is ill, and we can't wait. For he must not and shall not go away, and perhaps die, without me." And Lottie broke down and wept.

"But what do you want to do?" said Mrs. Blake. It was a shock to her, and she was sorry for Addie, but she could not repress a thrill of exultation at the thought that Horace Thorne, whom she had so coveted for a son-in-law, was caught. The state of his health was serious of course, but they must hope for the best, and the idea of an alliance with one of the leading county families dazzled her.

"We want to be married before he goes out, and nobody to know anything about it," said Lottie; "and then you must take me abroad this winter."

Mrs. Blake declared that it was utterly impossible.

"Oh, very well," said Lottie, drying her tears. "Then I give you fair warning. I shall run away, and get to Horace somehow. I don't know whether we can get married abroad—"

"I should think not—a child like you, without my consent," said Mrs. Blake.

"No, I suppose we couldn't. Well, then, it will be your doing, you know, if we are not. I shouldn't like to have such a thing on my conscience," said Lottie virtuously. "But perhaps you don't mind."

Mrs. Blake said that it was impossible

that Lottie could be so lost to all sense of propriety, so wicked, so unwomanly—

The girl stood opposite, slim, white and resolute. Her slender hands hung loosely clasped before her and a fierce spark burned in her eyes.

"Oh, that's impossible too, is it?" she said quietly. "We'll see."

Mrs. Blake quailed, but murmured something about her "authority."

"Oh yes," was the calm reply. "You might lock me up. Try it: I think I should get out. Make a fuss and ruin Horace and me. That you *can* do, but keep us apart you can't."

"You don't know, you can't know, what it is you talk of doing, or you couldn't stand there without blushing."

"Very likely not," said Lottie. "But since I know enough to do it—"

"You are a wicked, wilful child."

"Wicked? Perhaps. Yes, I think I am wicked. I'm a child, I know. Help me, mother, for I love him!"

The argument was prolonged, but the end could not be doubtful. Mrs. Blake could scold and bluster, but Lottie was determined. The mother was in bondage to Mrs. Grundy: the daughter played the trump card of her utter recklessness and won the game.

Having yielded, Mrs. Blake threw herself heart and soul into the scheme. She announced that painful recollections made Fordborough impossible as a place of residence, that Lottie was looking ill, and that they both required a thorough change. She dropped judiciously disagreeable remarks about her stepson till Addie was up in arms, and said that her mother and Lottie might go where they liked, but she should go to her aunt, Miss Blake, till Oliver, who was on his way, came home. Then Mrs. Blake shut up her house and went quietly off to Folkestone: Horace was to start from Dover in rather more than a fortnight's time.

After that the course was clear. Horace found out that he was worse, and must put off his departure for a week or ten days. Then, when the time originally fixed arrived, he said that he was better and would start at once. Naturally, Mrs. James was not ready, and



"DO YOU WANT TO SEE WHAT I HAVE SAID?"—Page 172.

he discovered that the house was intolerable with her dressmakers and packing, that he must break the journey somewhere, and that he might as well wait for her at Dover. The morning

after his arrival there he took the train to Folkestone, met Lottie and her mother, went straight to the church, and came back to Dover a lonely but triumphant bridegroom, while Mrs. Blake and Mrs.

Horace Thorne crossed at once to Boulogne.

It was necessary that Mrs. James should be enlightened, but Horace was not alarmed: he knew that she had no choice but to make common cause with him. Mrs. Blake, however, could hardly make up her mind what should be done about Addie. She more than suspected that the tidings would be a painful humiliation to her daughter. "We mustn't tell her," she said at last to Lottie. "She might be spiteful: it wouldn't be safe."

"It will be quite safe," said Lottie. "Because of what we used to say about Horace, you mean? But that is just what makes it safe. I know Addie: she won't let any one say that she betrayed me because she wanted Horace herself once. She *said* she didn't, but I think there was something in it; and if there was, she'd be torn in pieces sooner than let any one say so."

There was a curious straightforwardness about Lottie, even while she schemed and plotted. She calculated the effect of her sister's tenderness for Horace as frankly and openly as one might reckon on a tide or a train, and behaved as if the old saying, "All is fair in love and war," were one of the Thirty-nine Articles.

She wrote her letter without difficulty or hesitation. It was after Horace had joined them, and he laid his hand lightly on her shoulder as she was contemplating her new signature.

"Nearly done?" he said. "And who is to have the benefit of all this?"

"Addie: she ought to know."

"Ah!" There was something of uneasiness in his tone, as if an unpleasant idea had been presented to him. Horace had felt, when he arranged his secret marriage, that he and Lottie were doing a daring and romantic deed, and risking all for love in a truly heroic fashion. But when she told him that she had written to Addie the matter wore a less heroic aspect. Lottie might be unconscious of this in her sweet sincerity, thought the ardent lover, but he remembered old days and felt like anything but a hero.

"Do you want to see what I have said?" She tilted her chair backward and looked up at him with her great clear eyes.

"No," Horace answered with a smile: "I'm not going to pry into your letters." In his heart he knew that it was impossible to put the revelation of their secret to Addie into any words that would not be painful to him to read.

"Shall I give any message for you?"

"N-no," said Horace, doubtfully: "I think not."

"It might be considered more civil if you sent one."

"Then say anything you please," was the half-reluctant rejoinder.

"Oh, I'm not going to invent your messages, you lazy boy! A likely story!" Lottie sprang up and put the pen into his hand: "There! write for yourself, sir."

Horace thought that a refusal would betray his feelings about Addie, and he sat down, wondering what he was going to say. But his eye was caught by the last two words of the letter, "LOTTIE THORNE;" and as he looked at them the young husband forgot Addie and his lips curved in a tender smile.

"Make haste," said Lottie from the window — "make haste and come to me."

Horace started from his happy reverie, set his teeth and wrote:

"DEAR ADDIE: I suppose Lottie has told you everything. It was a reckless thing to do, no doubt: perhaps you will say it was wrong and underhand. Some people will, I dare say, but I hope you won't, for I should like to start with your good wishes. May I call myself

"Your brother, H. T.?"

In due time came the answer:

"DEAR HORACE: I will not pass judgment on you and your doings: I am not clever in arguing such matters. I will only say (which is more to the point, isn't it?) that you and Lottie have my best wishes for the safe-keeping of your secret, and anything I can do to help you I will. We are having very cold damp weather, so

I am glad you are safe in a warmer climate, and hope you are the better for it.

"Your affectionate sister,
"ADELAIDE BLAKE."

Horace showed this to Lottie, and then thrust it away and forgot it all as quickly as he could. Addie had read this little scrap in her own room, had stood for a moment staring at it, had kissed it suddenly, then torn it into a dozen pieces and stamped upon it. Then she gathered up the fragments, sighed over them, burnt them, and vowed she would think no more of it or him. But as she went about the house there floated continually before her eyes, "Your brother, H. T.;" and the word which had been so sweet to her, which had always meant her dear old Noll, and which she had uttered so triumphantly to Percival in Langley Wood when she said "I have a brother," became her torment.

Horace felt like a hero again when he forgot Addie, and only remembered how he was risking his grandfather's displeasure for his love's sake. He fully thought, as he had said, that he was Esau, and that smooth Jacob would win a large share of the inheritance; but when he stood with his back to the fireplace at Brackenhill, and knew that he was master of all, Percival's parting sneer awoke his old doubts as to his heroism once more. He had succeeded too well, and the risk which had ennobled his conduct in his own eyes would never be realized by others. Percival's attempt to supplant him had been foiled, and Horace was triumphant, yet he regretted the glaring contrast in their positions which rendered comparisons of their respective merits inevitable. But he could do nothing. Percival had said, "Don't let him offer me money." Horace, keener-sighted than Aunt Harriet, had not the slightest intention of doing so. He knew how such overtures would be received; and, after all, Brackenhill was his by right! And had not Percival plenty to live on?

And as for himself, let who would turn their backs on him—even Aunt Harriet, if it must be so—he had Lottie, and could defy the world.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A START IN LIFE.

FOR some days after he left Brackenhill, Percival was busy arranging his affairs. His ruin was remarkably complete. He had been running up bills in every direction during the last month or two, intending to pay for everything before his marriage out of the funds which were in Mr. Lisle's hands. He had plenty there, he knew, for his method of saving had been to live principally on his grandfather's supplies, and to leave his own to accumulate under his guardian's care—a plan which had always seemed to him admirably simple, as indeed it had proved to be. Lately he had not received much from the squire, because the old man so fully intended to provide for his favorite once and for all on the approaching wedding-day. Percival got some of the tradesmen to take back their goods, and sold off everything he had to meet the rest of the claims against him. Even the watch his grandfather had given him went, on Bombastes Furioso's theory that

Watches were made to go.

Hammond was urgent that he should accept a loan. "It isn't friendly to be so infernally proud," said Godfrey.

"What do you call being 'infernally proud'?" Percival retorted. "I've been living on you for the last fortnight; and I bought myself a silver watch this morning, and I've got two pounds seventeen shillings and sevenpence and a big portmanteau full of clothes. I don't *want* your money."

It was after dinner. Hammond filled his glass and pushed the bottle to his guest. "What do you mean to do?" he asked.

"Ah, that's the question," answered Percival. "Do you happen to know if one has to pass much of an examination to qualify one for breaking stones on the roads now-a-days? Not that I should like that much;" and he sipped his claret reflectively. "It would be rather monotonous, wouldn't it? And I can't help thinking that bits would get into one's eyes."

"I think so too," said Godfrey. "Emigrate."

"That advice would be good in some cases. But addressed to any one who is notoriously helpless its meaning is obvious."

"Are you notoriously helpless?"

"Am I not?"

"Well, perhaps. What does it mean, then?"

"It is a civil way of saying, 'Ruin is inevitably before you—gradual descent in the social scale, ending in misery and starvation. *Would* you be so kind as to go through the process a few thousand miles away, instead of just outside my front door?' I don't say you mean that—"

"I'm sure I won't say I don't," Hammond interrupted him. "Very likely I do: I don't pretend to be any better than my neighbors. But that doesn't matter. If you are so clear-sighted that there's no sending you off under a happy delusion, it would be mere brutality to urge you to undergo sea-sickness in the search for such a fate. As you say, it is attainable here. Will you turn tutor?"

Percival winced: "That sort of thing isn't easy to get into, is it? I doubt if I've the least aptitude for teaching, and I never went to college. I should be a very inferior article—not hall-marked."

"Then write," said Godfrey.

"Cudgel my lazy brains to produce trash, and hate my worthless work, which probably wouldn't sell. I haven't it in me, Godfrey." There was a pause.—"By Jove, though, I *will* write!" said Percival suddenly.

"What will you write?"

"Anything. I'll be a lawyer's clerk."

"But, my good fellow, you'll have to pay to be articled. I fear you won't make a living for years."

"Articled? nonsense! I'll be a copying-clerk—one of those fellows who sit perched up on high stools at a desk all day. I *can* write, at any rate, so that will be an honest way of getting my living—the only one I can see."

Hammond was startled, and expostulated, but in vain. The relief of a decision was so great that Percival clung

to it. Hammond talked of a situation in a bank, but Percival hated figures. His scheme gave him a chance of cutting himself loose from all former associations and beginning a new, unknown and lonely life. "No one will take any notice of a lawyer's clerk," he said. "I want to get away and hide myself. I don't want to go into anything where I shall be noticed and encouraged, and expected to rise—don't let any one ever expect me to rise, for I certainly sha'n't—nor where any one can say, 'That is Thorne of Brackenhill's grandson.' I'm shipwrecked, and I've no heart for new ventures."

"Not just at present," said Godfrey.

"Never," said the other. "I'm not the stuff a successful man is made of, and what I want isn't likely to be gained in business. I might earn millions, I fancy, if I set them steadily before my eyes and loved the means for the end's sake, easier than I could get what I covet—three or four hundred a year, plenty of leisure, and brain and habits unspoilt by money-making. There's no chance for the man who not only hasn't the necessary keenness, but wouldn't like to have it. If you want to say, 'More fool you!' you may."

Hammond shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

"Stick to your money, Godfrey," said Thorne with a melancholy smile, "or you'll feel some day as if the ground were cut away from under your feet. It isn't pleasant."

"I'll take your word for it," said Hammond.

Percival mused a little. "It's hard, somehow," he said. "I didn't want much and I wasn't reckless: upon my word, it's hard. Well, it can't be helped. Look here: do you know a lawyer who would suit me?"

"Is that the way you mean to apply for a situation? Let us see: will Your Highness stay in town?"

"And meet all sorts of people? My Highness will not."

"In the country, then?"

"No, a big town—the bigger the better—some great manufacturing place,

where every one has smuts on his face, money in his pocket, and is too busy improving machinery to have time to look at his neighbor."

"Would Brenthill do?"

"Admirably."

"I know a man there: I dare say he would as soon oblige me as not. What shall I say?"

"Say that I want employment as a clerk, and that, though I am utterly inexperienced, I write a good hand and am fairly intelligent. Don't say that I am active and obliging, for I'm neither. Tell him that if he can give me a fair trial it is all that you ask, and that he may turn me out at the end of a week if I don't do."

Godfrey nodded assent.

"I think you may as well write it *now*," said Percival. "I shall find it difficult to live for any length of time on this private fortune of mine without making inroads on my capital."

Hammond stretched himself and crossed the room to his writing-table. "Are you sure you won't change your mind?" he said. "It will be a horrible existence. Clerks receive very poor pay: I don't believe you can live on it."

"At any rate, I can die rather more slowly on it, and that will be convenient just now."

"Why don't you wait, and see if we can't help you to something better?"

Percival shook his head: "No. I promised Sissy that if I took help from any one, it should be from her. I must try to stand by myself first."

Godfrey wrote, and Percival sat with bent head, poring over the little note which Sissy had sent to entreat that the past might be forgotten. "Let me do something for you," she wrote. "Come back to me, Percival, if you have forgiven me; and you said you had. I was so miserable that miserable night, and we were so hurried, I hardly know what I said or did. It was like a bad dream: let us forget it, and wake up and begin again. Can't we? Come and be good to me, as you were last autumn. You remember your song that day in the garden, 'You would die ere

I should grieve;' and I have grieved so bitterly since last Wednesday night! You will be good to me—won't you?—and I promise I will tell you everything always. I promise, Percival, and you know I will really when I say I promise."

He had answered her with tender and sorrowful firmness. "I knew your letter was coming," he said. "I was as certain of it, and of what you would say, as if I held it in my hand. But, Sissy, you wouldn't have written so to me if I had been a rich man, as you hoped I should be; and I can't take from your sweet pity what you couldn't give me when I asked it for love's sake. It is impossible, dear, but I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and I love you for it. I hardly know yet where I shall go and what I shall do; but if I should want any help I will ask it first of you, and I will be your friend and brother to my dying day."

Thus he closed the page of his life on which he had written that brief story of love. Yet Sissy's letter was an inexpressible comfort to him. It was something to know that elsewhere a little heart was beating—so true and kind that it would have given up its own happiness—to help him in his trouble.

A few days later Percival was going north in a slow train. On his right sat a stout man with his luggage tied up in a dirty handkerchief. On his left was an old woman in rusty black nursing an unpleasant grandchild, who made hideous demonstrations of friendship to young Thorne. Opposite was a soldier smoking vile tobacco, a clodhopping boy in corduroy, and a big girl whose tawdry finery was a miracle of jarring and vulgar colors.

Never, I think, could a young hero have set forth to make his way through the world with less hope than did Percival Thorne. He was already disheartened and disgusted, and questioned within himself whether life were worth having for those who went third-class. The slow train and the lagging hours crawled onward through the dust and heat. "And this," he thought, "should have been my wedding-day!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NO. 13 BELLEVUE STREET.

JUNE gave way to July, July to August, August to September. Lottie reigned at Brackenhill, and Mrs. Middleton, whose heart clung to the neighborhood where she had lived so long, had taken a house on the other side of Fordborough. Between it and her old home lay an impassable gulf—none the less real that it was not marked on the county map. It appeared there as a distance of five miles and a quarter, with a good road, but Mrs. Horace Thorne, as well as Mrs. Middleton, knew better. Lottie laughed, and Horace's resentment was so keen that he was almost unconscious of his pain.

Percival's utter disappearance was a nine days' wonder in Fordborough, and when curiosity was dying out it flamed up again on the discovery that the marriage was not only put off, but was off altogether. This fact, considered in connection with the old squire's will, gave rise to the idea that there was something queer about Mr. Percival Thorne—that he had been found out at the last moment, and had lost both wife and legacy in consequence. "No doubt it was hushed up on condition he should take himself off. The best thing they could do, but how sad for an old county family! Still, there will be black sheep, and what a mercy it was that Miss Langton was saved from him!" So people talked, and generally added that they could not tell why—just a feeling, you know—but they never had liked that Percival Thorne.

In September, Godfrey Hammond cut a tiny slip out of the *Times* and sent it to the banished man: "On the 15th, the wife of Horace Thorne, Esq., Brackenhill, Fordborough, of a son."

Percival ate his breakfast that morning with the scrap of paper by his plate, and looked at it with fierce, defiant eyes. Lottie was avenged indeed—she would never know how bitterly. He had sworn that he would never think of Brackenhill, yet without his knowledge it had been the background to his thoughts of everything. And now the cruel injustice of his fate had taken a new lease of life

in this baby boy: it would outlive him, it would become eternal. Percival leapt to his feet with a short laugh: "Well, that's over and done with! Good luck to the poor little fellow! he's innocent enough. And I don't suppose he'll ever know what a scoundrel his father was." So saying, he glanced at his watch and marched off to his work.

Those three months had left their trace on him. He loathed his life; he had no companions, no hope; he was absorbed in the effort to endure his suffering. His indolence made his daily labor hateful as the treadmill. He was fastidious, and his surroundings sickened him. His food disgusted him, and so did the close atmosphere of the office. But he had chosen his fate, and he had no heart to try to escape from it, since it gave him the means of keeping body and soul together. Day after day, as that hot September wore away, he looked out on a dreary range of roofs and chimney-pots. He learned to know and hate every broken tile. From his bedroom he looked into a narrow back yard, deep like a well, at the bottom of which children swarmed, uncleanly and unwholesome, and women gossiped and wrangled as they hung out dingy rags to dry. The fierce sun shone on it all, and on Percival as he leant at his window surveying it with disgust, yet something of fascination too. "I fancied the sun wouldn't seem so bright in holes like this," he mused. "I thought everything would be dull and dim. Instead of which, he glares into every cranny and corner, as if he were pointing at all the filth and squalid misery, and makes it ten times more abominable." Nor did the slanting rays light up anything pleasant and fresh in the bedroom itself. It was shabby and small, with coarsely-papered walls and a discolored ceiling. Percival remarked that his window had a very wide sill. He never found out the reason, unless it were intended that he should take the air by sitting on it and dangling his legs over the foulest of water-butts. But when night came the broad sill was the favorite battlefield for all the cats in the neighborhood. It might have been pointed out

as readily as they point you out the place where the students fight at Heidelberg.

From his sitting-room he looked on a melancholy street. The unsubstantial houses tried to seem—not respectable, no word so honest could be applied to them, but—genteel, and failed even in that miserable ambition. Percival used to watch the plastered fronts, flaking in the sun and rain, old while yet new, with no grace of bygone memory or present strength, till he fancied that they might be perishing of some foul leprosy like that described in Leviticus. And the wearisome monotony! They were all just alike, except that here and there one was a little dingier than its neighbors, with the railings more broken and the windows dirtier. One day, when his landlady insisted on talking to him and Percival was too courteous to be absolutely silent, he asked where the prospect was from which the street took its name. She said they used to be able to see Three-Corner Green from their attic-windows. In her mother's time there was a tree and a pond there, she believed, and she herself could remember it quite green, a great place for Cheap Jacks and people who preached and sold pills. But now it was all done away with and built over. It was Paradise Place, and Paradise Place wasn't much of a prospect, though there might be worse. But it was no detriment to Mr. Thorne's rooms, for it was only the attic that ever had the view. However, folks must call the place something, if only for the letters; and Bellevue looked well on them and sounded airy, and she was never the one for change. This sounded so like the beginning of a discourse on things in general that Percival thanked her and fled.

It was about ten minutes' walk to Mr. Ferguson's office. There, week after week, he toiled with dull industry. He could not believe that his drudgery would last: something—death perhaps—must come to break the monotony of that slowly unwinding chain of days, which was like a grotesquely dreary dream. To have flung himself heart and soul into his work not only de-

manded an effort of which he felt himself incapable, but it seemed to him that such an effort could only serve to identify him with this hideous life. So, with head bowed over interminable pages, he labored with patient indifference. On his left sat a clerk ten or fifteen years older than himself, a white-faced man, who blinked like an owl in sunlight and had a wearisome cough. There was always a sickly smell of lozenges about him, and he was fretful if every window was not tightly closed. On Percival's right was a sallow youth of nineteen. He worked by fits and starts, sometimes driving his pen along as if the well-being of the universe depended on the swift completion of his task and the planets might cease to revolve if he were idle, while a few minutes later he would be drawing absently on his blotting-paper or feeling for his whiskers, as if they might have arrived suddenly without his being aware of it. Probably he was thinking over his next speech at the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society. They debated high and important matters at their weekly meetings. They inquired, "Was Oliver Cromwell justified in putting King Charles to death?" they read interesting papers about it, and voted the unlucky monarch into or out of his grave with an energy which would have allowed him little rest if it could have taken effect. They marshalled many arguments to decide the knotty and important question, "Does our Country owe most to the Warrior or the Statesman?" and they made up their minds and voted about that too. The sallow young man was rather a distinguished member of the society, and had much to say on such problems as these.

The clerks did not like Thorne. They felt that he was not one of themselves, and said that he was stuck up and sulky. They resented his silence. If you do not like a man you always understand his silence as the speech you would most dislike—veiled. Above all, they resented his grave politeness. They left him alone, with an angry suspicion that it was exactly what he wanted them to do; as indeed it was, though he was painfully

conscious of the atmosphere of distrust and ill-will in which he lived. But he could have found no pleasure in their companionship, and in fact was only interested in their coats. He was anxious to learn how shabby a man might become and pass unnoticed in the office; so he would glance, without turning his head, at the white-faced man's sleeve, and rejoice to see the same threadbare cuff travelling slowly across a wide expanse of parchment.

When he wrote to Hammond he said that he was getting on very well. He could not say that his work was very amusing, but very likely he should get more used to it in time. He wished to be left alone and to give it a fair trial. How was Sissy?

Hammond replied that Mrs. Middleton had aged a good deal, but that she and Sissy were both pretty well, and had got an idea—he could not think from whom—that Percival had gone in for the law and was going to do something very amazing indeed. "They are waiting to be surprised," Godfrey wrote, "like children on their birthdays. St. Cecilia especially wouldn't for worlds open her eyes till the right moment comes and you appear in your glory as lord chancellor or attorney-general, or something of the kind. I'm afraid she's a little hazy about it all, though of course she knows that you will be a very great man and that you will wear a wig. Mrs. Middleton is perhaps a trifle more moderate in her expectations. I left them to build their castles in the air, since you had bound me to secrecy, but I wish you would tell them the truth. Or I would help you, as you know, if I knew how."

Percival answered that Godfrey must not betray him: "I couldn't endure that Horace and his wife should know of my difficulties; and as to living on Aunt Harriet—never! And how could I go back to Fordborough, now that Sissy and I have parted? She would sacrifice herself for me—poor child!—out of sheer pity. No: here I can live, after a fashion, and defy the world. And here I will live, and hope to know some day that Sissy has found her happiness.

Till then let her think that I am prospering."

Godfrey shrugged his shoulders over Percival's note. It was irrational, no doubt, but Thorne had a right to please himself, and might as well take care of his pride, since he had not much else to take care of. So he attempted no persuasion, but simply sent any Fordborough news and forwarded occasional letters from Mrs. Middleton and Sissy. As the autumn wore on, Percival began to feel strange as he opened the envelopes and saw the handwriting which belonged to his old life. He had an absurd idea that the letters should not have come to *him*—that his former self, the self Sissy had known, was gone. He read her letters by the light of what Hammond had told him, and saw the delicate wording by which she tried to show her sympathy, yet almost repelled his confidence. She was so anxious not to thrust herself into his secrets—it was so evident that she would not be troublesome, but would wait with shut eyes, as Hammond had said, for a birthday surprise and triumph! O poor little Sissy! O faith which he felt within himself no strength to vindicate! He answered her in carefully weighed sentences, and smiled as he wrote them down because they amused him—a smile sadder than tears. Percival Thorne was dead, and he was some one else, trying to think what Percival would have said, and to hide his death from Sissy, lest her heart should break for pity.

It was very foolish? Yes. But if you had parted yourself from every one you knew; if for five months you had never heard a friendly word; if you had a secret to hide and a part to play; if you lived alone, surrounded by faces of people with whom you had no faintest touch of sympathy—faces which were to you like those of swarming Chinese or men and women in a nightmare,—perhaps you might have some thoughts and fancies less calm and less rational than of old. And the more changed Percival felt himself, the more he shrank from the friends he had left.

November came. One day he looked

at the date on the office almanac and remembered that it was exactly a year since he went down to Brackenhill and heard of old Bridgman's death. He could not repress a short sudden laugh. It was half under his breath, but his neighbor, who was at that moment gazing fiercely into space and turning a sentence, heard it, and felt that it was in mockery of him. Percival was thinking how seriously he had considered that important question, "Would he stand as the Liberal candidate for Fordborough?" Percival Thorne, Esq., M. P. ! He might well laugh as he sat at his desk filling in a bundle of notices. But from that moment the sallow youth on his right hated him with a deadly hatred.

December came—a dull, gray, bitter December—not clear and sparkling, as December sometimes is, nor yet misty and warm, as if it would have you take it for a lingering autumn, but bitter without beauty, harsh and pitiless. Keen gusts of wind whirled dust and straws and rubbish in dreary little dances along Bellevue street, the faces of the passers-by were nipped and miserable with the cold, and the sullen sky hung low above the pallid row of houses opposite. Percival looked out on this and thought of Brackenhill, which he left in leafy June. He was very miserable : he had always been

quickly sensitive to the beauty or dreariness around him, and the gray dulness of the scene entered into his very soul. Warmth, leisure, sunlight and blue sky ! There was plenty of sunlight somewhere in the world. O God ! what had he done that it should be denied him ?

There was a weary craving upon him that might have led to terrible results, but his pride and fastidiousness saved him. His delicately cultivated palate loathed the coarse fire of spirits, and he had a healthy horror of drugs. Once or twice he had thought of opium when he could not escape, even in dreams, from the grayness of his life. "This is unendurable," he would say ; and he played in fancy with the key which unlocks the gates of that strange region lying on the borders of paradise and hell. But his better sense questioned, "Will it be any more endurable when I have ruined my nerves and the coats of my stomach ?" It did not seem probable that it would be. If death had been the risk he might have faced it, but he recoiled from the thought of a premature and degraded old age, still chained to the hateful desk.

There are times when a man may be cheaply made into a hero. What would not Percival have given for the chance of doing some deed of reckless bravery ?



CHAPTER XXXV.
OF THE LANDLADY'S DAUGHTER.



EARLY in that December the landlady's daughter came home. Percival could not fix the precise date, but he knew it was early in the month, because about the eighth or ninth he was suddenly aware that he had more than once encountered a smile, a long curl and a pair of turquoise earrings on the stairs. He had noticed the earrings: he could speak positively as to them. He had seen turquoises before, and taken little heed of them, but possibly his friends had happened to buy rather small ones. He felt pretty certain about the long curl. And he thought there was a smile, but he was not so absolutely sure of the smile.

By the twelfth he was quite sure of it. It seemed to him that it was cold work for any one to be so continually on the stairs in December. The owner of the smile had said, "Good-morning, Mr. Thorne."

On the thirteenth a question suggested itself to him: "Was she—could she be—

always running up and down stairs? Or did it happen that just when he went out and came back—?" He balanced his pen in his fingers for a minute, and sat pondering. "Oh, confound it!" he said to himself, and went on writing.

That evening he left the office to the minute, and hurried to Bellevue street. He got halfway up the stairs and met no one, but he heard a voice on the landing exclaim, "Go to old Fordham's caddy, then, for you sha'n't— Oh, good gracious!" and there was a hurried rustle. He went more slowly the rest of the way, reflecting. Fordham was another lodger—elderly, as the voice had said. Percival went to his sitting-room and looked thoughtfully into his tea-caddy. It was nearly half full, and he calculated that, according to the ordinary rate of consumption, it should have been empty, and yet he had not been more sparing than usual. His landlady had told him where to get his tea: she said she found it cheap—it was a fine-flavored tea, and she always drank it. Percival supposed so, and wondered where old Fordham got his tea, and whether that was fine-flavored too.

There was a giggle outside the door, a knock, and in answer to Percival's "Come in," the landlady's daughter appeared. She explained that Emma had gone out shopping—Emma was the grimy girl who ordinarily waited on him—so, with a nervous little laugh, with a toss of the long curl, which was supposed to have got in the way somehow, and with the turquoise earrings quivering in the candlelight, she brought in the tray. She conveyed by her manner that it was a new and amusing experience in her life, but that the burden was almost more than her strength could support, and that she required assistance. Percival, who had stood up when she came in and thanked her gravely from his position on the hearthrug, came forward and swept some books and papers out of the way to make

room for her load. In so doing their hands touched—his white and beautifully shaped, hers clumsy and coarsely colored. (It was not poor Lydia's fault. She had written to more than one of those amiable editors who devote a column or two in family magazines to settling questions of etiquette, giving recipes for pomades and puddings, and telling you how you may take stains out of silk, get rid of freckles or know whether a young man means anything by his attentions. There had been a little paragraph beginning, "L.'s hands are not as white as she could wish, and she asks us what she is to do. We can only recommend," etc. Poor L. had tried every recommendation in faith and in vain, and was in a fair way to learn the hopelessness of her quest.)

The touch thrilled her with pleasure and Thorne with repugnance. He drew back, while she busied herself in arranging his cup, saucer and plate. She dropped the spoon on the tray, scolded herself for her own stupidity, looked up at him with a hurried apology, and laughed. If she did not blush, she conveyed by her manner a sort of idea of blushing, and went out of the room with a final giggle, being confused by his opening the door for her.

Percival breathed again, relieved from an oppression, and wondered what on earth had made her take an interest in his tea and him. Yet the reason was not far to seek. It was that tragic, melancholy, hero's face of his—he felt so little like a hero that it was hard for him to realize that he looked like one—his sombre eyes, which might have been those of an exile thinking of his home, the air of proud and rather old-fashioned courtesy which he had inherited from his grandfather the rector and developed for himself. Every girl is ready to find something of the prince in one who treats her with deference as if she were a princess. Percival had an unconscious grace of bearing and attitude, and the considerable advantage of well-made clothes. Poverty had not yet reduced him to cheap coats and advertised trousers. And perhaps the crowning fascination in poor

Lydia's eyes was the slight, dark, silky moustache which emphasized without hiding his lips.

Another rustling outside, a giggle and a whisper—Percival would have sworn that the whisper was Emma's if it had been possible that she could have left it behind her when she went out shopping—an ejaculation, "Gracious! I've blacked my hand!" a pause, presumably for the purpose of removing the stain, and Lydia reappeared with the kettle. She poured a portion of its contents over the fender in her anxiety to plant it firmly on the fire. "Oh dear!" she exclaimed, "how stupid of me! Oh, Mr. Thorne"—this half archly, half pensively, fingering the curl and surveying the steaming pool—"I'm afraid you'll wish Emma hadn't gone out: such a mess as I've made of it! What will you think of me?"

"Pray, don't trouble yourself," said Percival. "The fender can't signify, except perhaps from Emma's point of view. It doesn't interfere with my comfort, I assure you."

She departed, only half convinced. Percival, with another sigh of relief, proceeded to make the tea. The water was boiling and the fire good. Emma was apt to set a chilly kettle on a glimmering spark, but Lydia treated him better. The bit of cold meat on the table looked bigger than he expected, the butter wore a cheerful sprig of green. Percival saw his advantages, but he thought them dearly bought, especially as he had to take a turn up and down Bellevue street while the table was cleared.

After that day it was astonishing how often Emma went out shopping or was busy, or had a bad finger or a bad foot, or was helping ma with something or other, or hadn't made herself tidy, so that Lydia had to wait on Mr. Thorne. But it was always with the same air of its being something very droll and amusing to do, and there were always some artless mistakes which required giggling apologies. Nor could he doubt that he was in her thoughts during his absence. She had a piano down stairs on which she accompanied herself as she sang,

but she found time for domestic cares. His buttons were carefully sewn on and his fire was always bright. One evening his table was adorned with a bright blue vase—as blue as Lydia's earrings—filled with dried grasses and paper flowers. He gazed blankly at it in unspeakable horror, and then paced up and down the room, wondering how he should endure life with it continually before his eyes. Some books lay on a side-table, and as he passed he looked absently at them and halted. On his Shelley, slightly askew, as if to preclude all thought of care and design, lay a little volume bound in dingy white and gold. Percival did not touch it, but he stooped and read the title, *The Language of Flowers*, and saw that—purely by accident of course—a leaf was doubled down as if to mark a place. He straightened himself again, and his proud lip curled in disgust as he glanced from the tawdry flowers to the tawdry book. And from below came suddenly the jingling notes of Lydia's piano and Lydia's voice—not exactly harsh and only occasionally out of tune, but with something hopelessly vulgar in its intonation—singing her favorite song—

Oh, if I had some one to love me,
My troubles and trials to share!

Percival turned his back on the blue vase and the little book, and flinging himself into a chair before the fire sickened at the thought of the life he was doomed to lead. Lydia, who was just mounting with a little uncertainty to a high note, was a good girl in her way, and good-looking, and had a kind sympathy for him in his evident loneliness. But was she to be the highest type of womanhood that he would meet henceforth? And was Bellevue street to be his world? He glided into a mournful dream of Brackenhill, which would never be his, and of Sissy, who had loved him so well, yet failed to love him altogether—Sissy, who had begged for her freedom with such tender pain in her voice while she pierced him so cruelly with her frightened eyes. Percival looked very stern in his sadness as he sat brooding over his fire, while from the

room below came a triumphant burst of song—

But I will marry my own love,
For true of heart am I.

Sometimes he would picture to himself the future which lay before Horace's three-months-old child, whose little life already played so all-important a part in his own destiny. He had questioned Hammond about him, and Hammond had replied that he heard that Lottie and the boy were both doing well. "They say that the child is a regular Blake, just like Lottie herself," said Godfrey, "and doesn't look like a Thorne at all." Percival thought, not unkindly, of Lottie's boy, of Lottie's great clear eyes in an innocent baby face, and imagined him growing up slim and tall, to range the woods of Brackenhill in future years as Lottie herself had wandered in the copses about Fordborough. And yet sometimes he could not but think of the change that it might make if little James William Thorne were to die. Horace was very ill, they said: Brackenhill was shut up, and they had all gone to winter abroad. The doctors had declared that there was not a chance for him in England.

At this time Percival kept a sort of rough diary. Here is a leaf from it: "I am much troubled by a certain little devil who comes as soon as I am safely in bed and sits on my pillow. He flattens it abominably, or else I do it myself tossing about in my impatience. He is quite still for a minute or two, and I try my best to think he isn't there at all. Then he stoops down and whispers in my ear 'Convulsions!' and starts up again like india-rubber. I won't listen. I recall some tune or other: it won't come, and there is a hitch, a horrible blank, in the midst of which he is down again—I knew he would be—suggesting 'Croup.' I repeat some bit of a poem, but it won't do: what is the next line? I think of old days with my father, when I knew nothing of Brackenhill: I try to remember my mother's face. I am getting on very well, but all at once I become conscious that he has been for some time murmuring, as to himself, 'Whoop-

ing-cough and scarlet fever—scarlet fever.' I grow fierce, and say, 'I pray God he may escape them all!' To which he softly replies, 'His grandfather died—his father is dying—of decline.'

"I roll over to the other side, and encounter him or his twin brother there. A perfectly silent little devil this time, with a faculty for calling up pictures. He shows me the office: I see it, I smell it, with its flaring gaslights and sickly atmosphere. Then he shows me the long drawing-room at Brackenhill, the quaint old furniture, the pictures on the walls, the terrace with its balustrade and balls of mossy stone, and through the windows come odors of jasmine and roses and far-off fields, while inside there is the sweetness of dried blossoms and spices in the great china jars. A moment more and it is Bellevue street, with its rows of hideous whited houses. And then again it is a river, curving swiftly and grandly between its castled rocks, or a bridge of many arches in the twilight, and the lights coming out one by one in the old walled town, and the road and river travelling one knows not where, into regions just falling asleep in the quiet dusk. Or there is a holiday crowd, a moonlit ferry, steep wooded hills, and songs and laughter which echo in the streets and float across the tide. Or the Alps, keenly cut against the infinite depth of blue, with a whiteness and a far-off glory no tongue can utter. Or a solemn cathedral, or a busy town piled up, with church and castle high aloft and a still, transparent lake below. But through it all, and underlying it all, is Bellevue street, with the dirty men and women, who scream and shout at each other and wrangle in its filthy courts and alleys. Still, God knows that I don't repent, and that I wish my little cousin well."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WANTED—AN ORGANIST.

IN later days Percival looked back to that Christmas as his worst and darkest time. His pride had grown morbid, and

he swore to himself that he would never give in—that Horace should never know him otherwise than self-sufficient, should never think that but for Mrs. Middleton's or Godfrey Hammond's charity he might have had his cousin as a pensioner. Brooding on thoughts such as these, he sauntered moodily beneath the lamps when the new year was but two days old.

His progress was stopped by a little crowd collected on the pavement. There was a concert, and a string of carriages stretched halfway down the street. Just as Percival came up, a girl in white and amber, with flowers in her hair, flitted hurriedly across the path and up the steps, and stood glancing back while a fair-haired, faultlessly-dressed young man helped her mother to alight. The father came last, sleek, stout and important. The old people went on in front, and the girl followed with her cavalier, looking up at him and making some bright little speech as they vanished into the building. Percival stood and gazed for a moment, then turned round and hurried out of the crowd. The grace and freshness and happy beauty of the girl had roused a fierce longing in his heart. He wanted to touch a lady's hand again, to hear the delicate accents of a lady's voice. He remembered how he used to dress himself as that fair-haired young man was dressed, and escort Aunt Harriet and Sissy to Fordborough entertainments, where the best places were always kept for the Brackenhill party. It was dull enough sometimes, yet how he longed for one such evening now—to hand the cups once again at afternoon tea, to talk just a little with some girl on the old terms of equality! The longing was not the less real, and even passionate, that it seemed to Thorne himself to be utterly absurd. He mocked at himself as he walked the streets for a couple of hours, and then went back when the concert was just over and the people coming away. He watched till the girl appeared. She looked a little tired, he fancied. As she came out into the chill night air she drew a soft white cloak round her, and went by, quite uncon-

scious of the dark young man who stood near the door and followed her with his eyes. The sombre apparition might have startled her had she noticed it, though Percival was only gazing at the ghost of his dead life, and, having seen it, disappeared into the shadows once more.

"The night is darkest before the morn." In Percival's case this was true, for the next day brought a new interest and hope. A letter came from Godfrey Hammond, through which he glanced wearily till he came to a paragraph about the Lises: Hammond had seen a good deal of them lately. "Their father treated you shamefully," he wrote, "but, after all, it is harder still on his children." ("Good Heavens! Does he suppose I have a grudge against them?" said Percival to himself, and laughed with mingled irritation and amazement.) "Young Lisle wants a situation as organist somewhere where he might give lessons and make an income so, but we can't hear of anything suitable. People say the boy is a musical genius, and will do wonders, but, for my part, I doubt it. He may, however, and in that case there will be a line in his biography to the effect that I 'was one of the first to discern,' etc., which may be gratifying to me in my second childhood."

Percival laid the letter on the table and looked up with kindling eyes.

Only a few minutes' walk from Bellevue street was St. Sylvester's, a large district church. The building was a distinguished example of cheap ecclesiastical work, with stripes and other pretty patterns in different colored bricks, and varnished deal fittings and patent corrugated roofing. All that could be done to stimulate devotion by means of texts painted in red and blue had been done, and St. Sylvester's, within and without, was one of those nineteenth-century churches which will doubtless be studied with interest and wonder by the architect of a future age if they can only contrive to stand up till he comes. The incumbent was High Church, as a matter of course, and musical, more than as a matter of course. Percival looked up from his letter with a sudden remembrance that Mr. Clifton was advertising

for an organist, and on his way to the office he stopped to make inquiries at the High Church bookseller's and to post a line to Hammond. How if this should suit Bertie Lisle? He tried hard not to think too much about it, but the mere possibility that the bright young fellow, with his day-dreams, his unfinished opera, his pleasant voice and happily thoughtless talk, might come into his life gave Percival a new interest in it. Bertie had been a favorite of his years before, when he used to go sometimes to Mr. Lisle's. He still thought of him as little more than a boy—the boy who used to play to him in the twilight—and he had some trouble to realize that Bertie must be nearly two and twenty. If he should come— But most likely he would not come. It seemed a shame even to wish to shut up the young musician, with his love for all that was beautiful and bright, in that grimy town. Thorne resolved that he would not wish it, but he opened Hammond's next letter with unusual eagerness. Godfrey said they thought it sounded well, especially as when he named Brenthill it appeared that the Lises had some sort of acquaintance living there, an old friend of their mother's, he believed, which naturally gave them an interest in the place. Bertie had written to Mr. Clifton, who would very shortly be in town, and had made an appointment to meet him.

The next news came in a note from Lisle himself. On the first page there was a pen-and-ink portrait of the incumbent of St. Sylvester's with a nimbus, and it was elaborately dated "Festival of St. Hilary."

"It is all as good as settled," was his triumphant announcement, "and we are in luck's way, for Judith thinks she has heard of something for herself too. You will see from my sketch that I have had my interview with Mr. Clifton. He is quite delighted with me. A great judge of character, that man! He is to write to one or two references I gave him, but they are sure to be all right, for my friends have been so bored with me and my prospects for the last few weeks that they would swear to my fitness for heav-

en if it would only send me there. I rather think, however, that St. Sylvester's will suit me better for a little while. His Reverence is going to look me up some pupils, and I have bought a Churchman's almanac, and am thinking about starting an oratorio instead of my opera. Wasn't it strange that when your letter came from Brenthill we should remember that an old friend of my mother's lived there? Judith and she have been writing to each other ever since. Clifton is evidently undergoing tortures with the man he has got now, so I should not wonder if we are at Brenthill in a few days. It will be better for my chance of pupils too. I shall look you up without fail, and expect you to know everything about lodgings. How about Bellevue street? Are you far from St. Sylvester's?"

Thorne read the letter carefully, and drew from it two conclusions and a perplexity. He concluded that Bertie Lisle's elastic spirits had quickly recovered the shock of his father's failure and flight, and that he had not the faintest idea that any property of his—Percival's—had gone down in the wreck. So much the better.

His perplexity was, What was Miss Lisle going to do? Could the "we" who were to arrive imply that she meant to accompany her brother? And what was the something she had heard of for herself? The words haunted him. Was the ruin so complete that she too must face the world and earn her own living? A sense of cruel wrong stirred in his inmost soul.

He made up his mind at last that she was coming to establish Bertie in his lodgings before she went on her own way. He offered any help in his power when he answered the letter, but he added a postscript: "Don't think of Bellevue street: you wouldn't like it." He heard no more till one day he came back to his early dinner and found a sealed envelope on his table. It contained a half sheet of paper, on which Bertie had scrawled in pencil, "Why did you abuse Bellevue street? We think it will do. And why didn't you say there were rooms in this very house? We have

taken them, so there is an end of your peaceful solitude. I'm going to practise for ever and ever. If you don't like it there's no reason why you shouldn't leave: it's a free country, they say."

Percival looked round his room. She had been there, then?—perhaps had stood where he was standing. His glance fell on the turquoise-blue vase and the artificial flowers, and he colored as if he were Lydia's accomplice. Had she seen those and the *Language of Flowers*?

As if his thought had summoned her, Lydia herself appeared to lay the cloth for his dinner. She looked quickly round: "Did you see your note, Mr. Thorne?"

"Thank you, yes," said Percival.

"I supposed it was right to show them in here to write it—wasn't it?" she asked after a pause. "He said he knew you very well."

"Quite right, certainly."

"A very pleasant-spoken young gentleman, ain't he?" said Miss Bryant, setting down a salt-cellar.

"Very," said Percival.

"Coming to play the High Church organ, he tells me," Lydia continued, as if the instrument in question were somehow saturated with ritualism.

"Yes—at St. Sylvester's."

Lydia looked at him, but he was gazing into the fire. She went out, came back with a dish, shook her curl out of the way, and tried again: "I suppose we're to thank you for recommending the lodgings—ain't we, Mr. Thorne? I'm sure ma's much obliged to you. And I'm glad"—this with a bashful glance—"that you felt you could. It seems as if we'd given satisfaction."

"Certainly," said Percival. "But you mustn't thank me in this case, Miss Bryant. I really didn't know what sort of lodgings my friend wanted. But of course I'm glad Mr. Lisle is coming here."

"And ain't you glad *Miss* Lisle is coming too, Mr. Thorne?" said Lydia very archly. But she watched him, lynx-eyed.

He uttered no word of surprise, but he could not quite control the muscles of his face, and a momentary light leapt into

his eyes. "I wasn't aware Miss Lisle *was* coming," he said.

Lydia believed him. "That's true," she thought, "but you're precious glad." And she added aloud, "Then the pleasure comes all the more unexpected, don't it?" She looked sideways at Percival and lowered her voice: "P'r'aps Miss Lisle meant a little surprise."

Percival returned her glance with a grave scorn which she hardly understood. "My dinner is ready?" he said. "Thank you, Miss Bryant." And Lydia flounced out of the room, half indignant, half sorrowful: "*He* didn't know—that's true. But *she* knows what she's after, very well. Don't tell me!" To Lydia, at this moment, it seemed as if every girl must be seeking what she sought. "And I call it very bold of her to come poking herself where she isn't wanted—running after a young man. I'd be ashamed." A longing to scratch Miss Lisle's face was mixed with a longing to have a good cry, for she was honestly suffering the pangs of unrequited love. It is true that it was not for the first time. The curl, the earrings, the songs, the *Language of Flowers*, had done duty more than once before. But wounds may be painful without being deep, although the fact of these former healings might prevent all fear of any fatal ending to this later love. Lydia was very unhappy as she went down stairs, though if another hero could be found she was perhaps half conscious that the melancholy part of her present love-story might be somewhat abridged.

The streets seemed changed to Percival as he went back to his work. Their ugliness was as bare and as repulsive as ever, but he understood now that the houses might hold human beings, his brothers and his sisters, since some one roof among them sheltered Judith Lisle. Thus he emerged from the alien swarm amid which he had walked in solitude so many days. Above the dull and miry ways were the beauty of her gray-blue eyes and the glory of her golden hair. He felt as if a white dove had lighted on the town, yet he laughed at his own feelings; for what did he know of her?

He had seen her twice, and her father had swindled him out of his money.

Never had his work seemed so tedious, and never had he hurried so quickly to Bellevue street as he did when it was over. The door of No. 13 stood open, and young Lisle stood on the threshold. There was no mistaking him. His face had changed from the beautiful chorister type of two or three years earlier, but Percival thought him handsomer than ever. He ceased his soft whistling and held out his hand: "Thorne! At last! I was looking out for you the other way."

Thorne could hardly find time to greet him before he questioned eagerly, "You have really taken the rooms here?"

"Really and truly. What's wrong? Anything against the landlady?"

"No," said Percival. "She's honest enough, and fairly obliging, and all the rest of it. But then your sister is not coming here to live with you, as they told me? That was a mistake?"

"Not a bit of it. She's coming: in fact, she's here."

"In Bellevue street?" Percival looked up and down the dreary thoroughfare. "But, Lisle, what a place to bring her to!"

"Beggars mustn't be choosers," said Bertie. "We are not exactly what you would call rolling in riches just now. And Bellevue street happens to be about midway between St. Sylvester's and Standon Square, so it will suit us both."

"Standon Square?" Percival repeated.

"Yes. Oh, didn't I tell you? My mother came to school at Brenthill. It was her old schoolmistress we remembered lived here when we had your letter. So we wrote to her, and the old dear not only promised me some pupils, but it is settled that Judith is to go and teach there every day. Judith thinks we ought to stick to one another, we two."

"You're a lucky fellow," said Percival. "You don't know, and won't know, what loneliness is here."

"But how do *you* come to know anything about it? That's what I can't understand. I thought your grandfather died last summer?"

"So he did."

"But I thought you were to come in for no end of money?"

"I didn't, you see."

"But surely he always allowed you a

"SHE DREW A SOFT WHITE CLOAK ROUND HER, AND WENT BY."—Page 183.



lot," said Lisle, still unsatisfied. "You never used to talk of doing anything."

"No, but I found I must. The fact is, I'm not on the best terms with my cou-

sin at Brackenhill, and I made up my mind to be independent. Consequently, I'm a clerk—a copying-clerk, you understand—in a lawyer's office here—Ferguson's in Fisher street—and I lodge accordingly."

"I'm very sorry," said Bertie.

"Hammond knows all about it," the other went on, "but nobody else does."

"I was afraid there was something wrong," said Bertie—"wrong for you, I mean. From our point of view it is very lucky that circumstances have sent you here. But I hope your prospects may brighten; not directly—I can't manage to hope that—but soon."

Percival smiled. "Meanwhile," he said with a quiet earnestness of tone, "if there is anything I can do to help you or Miss Lisle, you will let me do it."

"Certainly," said Bertie. "We are going out now to look for a grocer. Suppose you come and show us one."

"I'm very much at your service. What are you looking at?"

"Why—you'll pardon my mentioning it—you have got the biggest smut on your left cheek that I've seen since I came here. They attain to a remarkable size in Brenthill, have you noticed?" Bertie spoke with eager interest, as if he had become quite a connoisseur in smuts. "Yes, that's it. I'll look Judith up, and tell her you are going with us."

Percival fled up stairs, more discomposed by that unlucky black than he would have thought possible. When he had made sure that he was tolerably presentable he waited by his open door till his fellow-lodgers appeared, and then stepped out on the landing to meet them. Miss Lisle, dressed very simply in black, stood drawing on her glove. A smile dawned on her face when her eyes met Percival's, and, greeting him in her low distinct tones, she held out her white right hand, still ungloved. He took it with grave reverence, for Judith Lisle had once touched his faint dream of a woman who should be brave with sweet heroism, tender and true. They had scarcely exchanged a dozen words in their lives, but he had said to himself, "If I were an artist I would paint my

ideal with a face like that;" and the memory, with its underlying poetry, sprang to life again as his glance encountered hers. Percival felt the vague poem, though Bertie was at his elbow chattering about shops, and though he himself had hardly got over the intolerable remembrance of that smut.

When they were in the street Miss Lisle looked eagerly about her, and asked as they turned a corner, "Will this be our way to St. Sylvester's?"

"Yes. I suppose Bertie will make his début next Sunday? I must come and hear him."

"Of course you must," said Lisle. "Where do you generally go?"

"Well, for a walk generally. Sometimes it ends in some outlying church, sometimes not."

"Oh, but it's your duty to attend your parish church when I play there. I suppose St. Sylvester's *is* your parish church?"

"Not a bit of it. St. Andrew's occupies that proud position. I've been there three times, I think."

"And what sort of a place is that?" said Miss Lisle.

"The dreariest, dustiest, emptiest place imaginable," Percival answered, turning quickly toward her. "There's an old clergyman, without a tooth in his head, who mumbles something which the congregation seem to take for granted is the service. Perhaps he means it for that: I don't know. He's the curate, I think, come to help the rector, who is getting just a little past his work. I don't remember that I ever saw the rector."

"But does any one go?"

"Well, there's the clerk," said Percival thoughtfully; "and there's a weekly dole of bread left to fourteen poor men and fourteen poor women of the parish. They must be of good character and above the age of sixty-five. It is given away after the afternoon service. When I have been there, there has always been a congregation of thirty, without reckoning the clergyman." He paused in his walk. "Didn't you want a grocer, Miss Lisle? I don't do much of my shopping, but I believe this place is as good as any."

Judith went in, and the two young men waited outside. In something less than half a minute Lisle showed signs of impatience. He inspected the grocer's stock of goods through the window, and extended his examination to a toy-shop beyond, where he seemed particularly interested in a small and curly lamb which stood in a pasture of green paint and possessed an underground squeak or baa. Finally, he returned to Thorne. "You like waiting, don't you?" he said.

"I don't mind it."

"And I do: that's just the difference. Is there a stationer's handy?"

"At the end of the street, the first turning to the left."

"I want some music-paper: I can get it before Judith has done ordering in her supplies if I go at once."

"Go, then: you can't miss it. I'll wait here for Miss Lisle, and we'll come and meet you if you are not back."

When Judith came out she looked round in some surprise: "What has become of Bertie, Mr. Thorne?"

"Gone to the bookseller's," said Percival: "shall we walk on and meet him?"

They went together down the gray, slushy street. The wayfarers seemed unusually coarse and jostling that evening, Percival thought, the pavement peculiarly miry, the flaring gaslights very cruel to the unloveliness of the scene.

"Mr. Thorne," Judith began, "I am glad of this opportunity. We haven't met many times before to-day."

"Twice," said Percival.

She looked at him, a faint light of surprise in her eyes. "Ah! twice," she repeated. "But you know Bertie well. You used often to come at one time, when I was away?"

"Oh yes, I saw a good deal of Bertie," he replied, remembering how he had taken a fancy to the boy.

"And he used to talk to me about you. I don't feel as if we were quite strangers, Mr. Thorne."

"Indeed, I hope not," said Percival, eluding a baker's boy and reappearing at her side.

"I've another reason for the feeling,

too, besides Bertie's talk," she went on. "Once, six or seven years ago, I saw your father. He came in one evening, about some business I think, and I still remember the very tone in which he talked of you. I was only a school-girl then, but I could not help understanding something of what you were to him."

"He was too good to me," said Percival, and his heart was very full. Those bygone days with his father, which had drifted so far into the past, seemed suddenly brought near by Judith's words, and he felt the warmth of the old tenderness once more.

"So I was very glad to find you here," she said. "For Bertie's sake, not for yours. I am so grieved that you should have been so unfortunate!" She looked up at him with eyes which questioned and wondered and doubted all at once.

But a small girl, staring at the shop-windows, drove a perambulator straight at Percival's legs. With a laugh he stepped into the roadway to escape the peril, and came back: "Don't grieve about me, Miss Lisle. It couldn't be helped, and I have no right to complain." These were his spoken words: his unspoken thought was that it served him right for being such a fool as to trust her father. "It's worse for you, I think, and harder," he went on; "and if you are so brave—"

"It's for Bertie if I am," she said quickly: "it is very hard on him. We have spoilt him, I'm afraid, and now he will feel it so terribly. For people cannot be the same to us: how should they, Mr. Thorne? Some of our friends have been very good—no one could be kinder than Miss Crawford—but it is a dreadful change for Bertie. And I have been afraid of what he would do if he went where he had no companions. A sister is so helpless! So I was very thankful when your letter came. But I am sorry for you, Mr. Thorne. He told me just now—"

"But, as that can't be helped," said Percival, "be glad for my sake too. I have been very lonely."

She looked up at him and smiled. "He insisted on going to Bellevue street the first thing this morning," she said. "I

don't think any other lodgings would have suited him."

"But they are not good enough for you."

"Oh yes, they are, and near Standon Square, too: I shall only have seven or eight minutes' walk to my work. I should not have liked— Oh, here he is!—Bertie, this is cool of you, deserting me in this fashion!"

"Why, of course you were all right with Thorne, and he asked me to let him help me in any way he could. I like to take a man at his word."

"By all means take me at mine," said Percival.

"Help you?" said Judith to her brother. "Am I such a terrible burden, then?"

"No," Thorne exclaimed. "Bertie is a clever fellow: he lets me share his privileges first, that I mayn't back out of sharing any troubles later."

"Are you going to save him trouble by making his pretty speeches for him, too?" Judith inquired with a smile. "You are indeed a friend in need."

They had turned back, and were walking toward Bellevue street. As they went into No. 13 they encountered Miss Bryant in the passage. She glanced loftily at Miss Lisle as she swept by, but she turned and fixed a look of reproachful tenderness on Percival Thorne. He knew that he was guiltless in the matter, and yet in Judith's presence he felt guilty and humiliated beneath Lydia's ostentatiously mournful gaze. The idea that she would probably be jealous of Miss Lisle flashed into his mind, to his utter disgust and dismay. He turned into his own room and flung himself into a chair, only to find, a few minutes later, that he was staring blankly at Lydia's blue vase. But for the Lisles, he might almost have been driven from Bellevue street by its mere presence on the table. It was beginning to haunt him: it mingled in his dreams, and he had drawn its hideous shape absently on the edge of his blotting-paper. Let him be where he might, it lay, a light-blue burden, on his mind. It was not the vase only, but he felt that it implied Lydia herself, curl, turquoise earrings, smile and all, and on

the evening of his meeting with Judith Lisle the thought was doubly hateful.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LYDIA REARRANGES HER CAP.

THUS, as the days lengthened, and the winter, bitter though it was, began to give faint promise of sunlight to come, Percival entered on his new life and felt the gladness of returning spring. At the beginning of winter our glances are backward: we are like spendthrifts who have wasted all in days of bygone splendor. We sit, pinched and poverty-stricken, by our little light of fire and candle, remembering how the whole land was full of warmth and golden gladness in our lavish prime. But our feelings change as the days grow clear and keen and long. This very year has yet to wear its crown of blossom. Its inheritance is to come, and all is fresh and wonderful. We would not ask the bygone summer for one day more, for we have the beauty of promise, instead of that beauty of long triumph which is heavy and over-ripe, and with March at hand we cannot desire September.

Percival's new life was cold and stern as the February weather, but it had its flitting gleams of grace and beauty in brief words or passing looks exchanged with Judith Lisle. He was no lover, to pine for more than Fate vouchsafed. It seemed to him that the knowledge that he might see her was almost enough; and it was well it should be so, for he met her very seldom. She went regularly to Standon Square, and came home late and tired. She had one half-holiday in the week, but Miss Crawford had recommended her to a lady whose eldest girl was dull and backward at her music, and she spent a great part of that afternoon in teaching Janie Barton. Bertie was indignant: "Why should you, who have an ear and a soul for music, be tortured by such an incapable as that? Let them find some one else to teach her."

"And some one else to take the money! Besides, Mrs. Barton is so kind—"

Bertie, who was lying on three chairs in front of the fire, sat up directly and looked resigned: "That's it! now for it! No one is so good as Mrs. Barton, except Miss Crawford; and no one is anything like Miss Crawford, except Mrs. Barton. Oh, I know! And old Clifton is the first and best of men. And so you lavish your gratitude on them—Judith, *why* are all our benefactors such awful guys?—while they ought to be thanking their stars they've got us!"

"Nonsense, Bertie!"

"'Tisn't nonsense. Aren't you better than I am? And old Clifton is very lucky to get such an organist. I think he is thankful, but I wish he wouldn't show it by asking me to tea again."

"Don't complain of Mr. Clifton," said Judith. "You are very fortunate, if you only knew it."

"Am I? Then suppose you go to tea with him if you are so fond of him. I rather think I shall have a severe cold coming on next Tuesday."

Judith said no more, being tolerably sure that when Tuesday came Bertie would go. But she was not quite happy about him. She lived as if she idolized the spoilt boy, but the blindness which makes idolatry joyful was denied to her. So that, though he was her first thought every day of her life, the thought was an anxious one. She was very grateful to Miss Crawford for having given him a chance, so young and untried as he was, but she could only hope that Bertie would not repay her kindness by some thoughtless neglect. At present all had gone well: there could be no question about his abilities, Miss Crawford was satisfied, and the young master got on capitally with his pupils. Neither was Judith happy when he was with Mr. Clifton. Bertie came home to mimic the clergyman with boyish recklessness, and she feared that the same kind of thing went on with some of the choir behind Mr. Clifton's back. ("Behind his back?" Bertie said one day. "Under his nose, if you like: it would be all one to Clifton.") He frightened her with his carelessness in money-matters and his scarcely concealed contempt for the means by which

he lived. "Thank Heaven! this hasn't got to last for ever," he said once when she remonstrated.

"Don't reckon on anything else," she pleaded. "I know what you are thinking of. Oh, Bertie, I don't like you to count on that."

He threw back his head, and laughed: "Well, if that fails, wait and see what I can do for myself."

He looked so bright and daring as he spoke that she could hardly help sharing his confidence. "Ah! the opera!" she said. "But, Bertie, you must work."

"The opera— Yes, of course I will work," Bertie answered. "Now you mention it, it strikes me I may as well have a pipe and think about it a bit. No time like the present, is there?" So Bertie had his pipe and a little quiet meditation. There was a lingering smile on his face as if something had amused him. He always felt particularly virtuous when he smoked his pipe, because it was so much more economical than the cigars of his prosperous days. "A penny saved is a penny gained." Bertie felt as if he must be gradually making his fortune as he leant back and watched the smoke curl upward.

And yet, with it all, how could Judith complain? He was the very life of the house as he ran up and down stairs, filling the dingy passages with melodious singing. He had a bright word for every one. The grimy little maid-servant would have died for him at a moment's notice. Bertie was always sweet-tempered: in very truth, there was not a touch of bitterness in his nature. And he was so fond of Judith, so proud of her, so thoroughly convinced of her goodness, so sure that he should do great things for her some day! What could she say against him?

Percival, too, was fascinated. His room smelt of Bertie's tobacco and was littered with blotted manuscripts. He went so regularly to hear Bertie play that Mr. Clifton noticed the olive-skinned, foreign-looking young man, and thought of asking him to join the Guild of St. Sylvester and take a class in the

Sunday-school. Yet Percival also had doubts about the young organist's future. He knew that letters came now and then from New York which saddened Judith and brightened Bertie. If Mr. Lisle prospered in America and summoned his son to share his success, would he have strength to cling to poverty and honor in England? There were times when Percival doubted it. There were times, too, when he doubted whether the boy's musical promise would ever ripen to worthy fruit, though he was angry with himself for his doubts. "If he triumphs, it will be *her* doing," he thought. Little as he saw of Judith, they were yet becoming friends. You may meet a man every day, and if you only talk to him about the weather and the leading articles in the *Times*, you may die of old age before you reach friendship. But these two talked of more than the weather. Once, emboldened by her remembrance of old days, he spoke of his father. He hardly noticed at the time that Judith took keen note of something he said of the old squire's utter separation from his son. "I was more Percival than Thorne till I was twenty," said he.

"And are you not more Percival than Thorne still?"

He liked to hear her say "Percival" even thus. "Perhaps," he said. "But it is strange how I've learned to care about Brackenhill—or, rather, it wasn't learning, it came by instinct—and now no place on earth seems like home to me except that old house."

Judith, fair and clear-eyed, leaned against the window and looked out into the twilight. After a pause she spoke: "You are fortunate, Mr. Thorne. You can look back happily to your life with your father."

The intention of her speech was evident: so was a weariness which he had sometimes suspected in her voice. He answered her: "And you cannot?"

"No," she said. "I was wondering just now how many people had reason to hate the name of Lisle."

Percival was not unconscious of the humorous side of such a remark when addressed to himself. But Judith look-

ed at him almost as if she would surprise his thought.

"Don't dwell on such things," he said. "Men in your father's position speculate, and perhaps hardly know how deeply they are involved, till nothing but a lucky chance will save them, and it seems impossible to do anything but go on. At last the end comes, and it is very terrible. But you can't mend it."

"No," said Judith, "I can't."

"Then don't take up a useless burden when you need all your strength. You were not to blame in any way."

"No," she said again, "I hope not. But it is hard to be so helpless. I do not even know their names. I can only feel as if I ought to be more gentle and more patient with every one, since any one may be—"

"Ah, Miss Lisle," said Percival, "you will pay some of the debts unawares in something better than coin."

She shook her head, but when she looked up at him there was a half smile on her lips. As she moved away Percival thought of Sissy's old talk about heroic women—"Jael, and Judith, and Charlotte Corday." He felt that this girl would have gone to her death with quiet dignity had there been need. Godfrey Hammond had called her a plain likeness of her brother, but Percival had seen at the first glance that her face was worth infinitely more than Bertie's, even in his boyish promise; and an artist would have turned from the brother to the sister, justifying Percival.

It was well for Percival that Judith's friendly smile and occasional greeting made bright moments in his life, since he had no more of Lydia's attentions. Poor grimy little Emma waited on him wearily, and always neglected him if the Lisles wanted her. She had apparently laid in an immense stock of goods, for she never went shopping now, but stayed at home and let his fire go out, and was late and slovenly with his meals. There was no great dishonesty, but his tea-caddy was no longer guarded and provisions ceased to be mysteriously preserved. Miss Bryant seldom met him on the stairs, and when she did she flounced

past him in lofty scorn. Her slighted love had turned to gall. She was bitter in her very desire to convince herself that she had never thought of Mr. Thorne. She neglected to send up his letters; she would not lift a finger to help in getting his dinner ready; and if Emma happened to be out of the way she would let his bell ring and take no notice. Yet she would have been very true to him, in her own fashion, if he would have had it so: she would have taken him for better, for worse—would have slaved for him and fought for him, and never suffered any one else to find fault with him in any way whatever. But he had not chosen that it should be so, and Lydia had reclaimed her heart and her pocket edition of the *Language of Flowers*, and now watched Percival and Miss Lisle with spiteful curiosity.

"I shall be late at Standon Square this evening: Miss Crawford wants me," said Judith one morning to her brother.

"I'll come and meet you," was his prompt reply. "What time? Don't let that old woman work you into an early grave."

"There's no fear of that. I'm strong, and it won't hurt me. Suppose you come at half-past nine: you must have your tea by yourself, I'm afraid."

"That's all right," he answered cheerfully.

"That's all right?" What do you mean by that, sir?"

"I mean that I don't at all mind when you don't come back to tea. I think I rather prefer it. There, Miss Lisle!"

"You rude boy!" She felt herself quite justified in boxing his ears.

"Oh, I say, hold hard! Mind my violets!" he exclaimed.

"Your violets? Oh, how sweet they are!" And bending forward, Judith smelt them daintily. "Where did you get them, Bertie?"

"Ah! where?" And Bertie stood before the glass and surveyed himself. The cheap lodging-house mirror cast a greenish shade over his features, but the little bouquet in his buttonhole came out very well. "Where did I get them? I didn't

buy them, if you mean that. They were given to me."

"Who gave them to you?"

"And then women say it isn't fair to call them curious!" Bertie put his head on one side, dropped his eyelids, looked out of the corners of his eyes, and smiled, fingering an imaginary curl.

"Not that nasty Miss Bryant? She didn't!"

"She did, though."

"The wretch! Then you sha'n't wear them one moment more." Bertie eluded her attack, and stood laughing on the other side of the table. "Oh, Bertie!" suddenly growing very plaintive, "why did you let me smell the nasty things?"

"They are very nice," said Lisle, looking down at the poor little violets. "Oh, we are great friends, Lydia and I. I shall have buttered toast for tea to-night."

"Buttered toast? What do you mean?"

"Why, it's a curious thing, but Emma—*isn't her name Emma?*—always has to work like a slave when you go out. I don't know why there should be so much more to do: you don't help her to clean the kettles or the steps in the general way, do you? It's a mystery. Anyhow, Lydia has to see after my tea, and then I have buttered toast or muffins and rashers of bacon. Lydia's attentions are just a trifle greasy perhaps, now I come to think of it. But she toasts muffins very well, does that young woman, and makes very good tea too."

"Bertie! I thought you made tea for yourself when I was away."

"Oh! did you? Not I: why should I? I had some of Mrs. Bryant's raspberry jam one night: that wasn't bad for a change. And once I had some prawns."

"Oh, Bertie! How *could* you?"

"Bless you, my child!" said Bertie, "how serious you look! Where's the harm? Do you think I shall make myself ill? By the way, I wonder if Lydia ever made buttered toast for Thorne? I suspect she did, and that he turned up his nose at it: she always holds her head so uncommonly high if his name is mentioned."

"Do throw those violets on the fire," said Judith.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind. I'm coming to Standon Square to give my lessons this morning, with my violets. See if I don't."

The name of Standon Square startled Judith into looking at the time. "I must be off," she said. "Don't be late for the lessons, and oh, Bertie, don't be foolish!"

"All right," he answered gayly. Judith ran down stairs. At the door she encountered Lydia and eyed her with lofty disapproval. It did not seem to trouble Miss Bryant much. She knew Miss Lisle disliked her, and took it as an inevitable fact, if not an indirect compliment to her conquering charms. So she smiled and wished Judith good-morning. But she had a sweeter smile for Bertie when, a little later, carefully dressed, radiant, handsome, with her violets in his coat, he too went on his way to Standon Square.

If Judith had been in Bellevue street when he came back, she might have noticed that the little bouquet was gone. Had it dropped out by accident? Or had Bertie merely defended his violets for fun, and thrown them away as soon as her back was turned? Or what had happened to them? There was no one to inquire.

Young Lisle strolled into Percival's room, and found him just come in and waiting for his dinner. "I'm going to practise at St. Sylvester's this afternoon," said the young fellow. "What do you say to a walk as soon as you get away?"

Percival assented, and began to move some of the books and papers which were strewn on the table. Lisle sat on the end of the horsehair sofa and watched him. "I can't think how you can endure that blue thing and those awful flowers continually before your eyes," he said at last.

Percival shrugged his shoulders. He could not explain to Lisle that to request that Lydia's love-token might be removed would have seemed to him to be like going down to her level and rejecting what he preferred to ignore. "What am I to

do?" he said. "I believe they think it very beautiful, and I fancy the flowers are home-made. People have different ideas of art, but shall I therefore wound Miss Bryant's feelings?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Bertie. "Did Lydia Bryant make those flowers? How interesting!" He pulled the vase toward him for a closer inspection. There was a crash, and light-blue fragments strewed the floor. Percival, piling his books on the side-table, looked round with an exclamation.

"Hullo!" said Lisle, "I've done it! Here's a pretty piece of work! And you so fond of it, too!" He was picking up the flowers as he spoke.—"Here, Emma," as the girl opened the door, "I've upset Mr. Thorne's flower-vase. Tell Miss Bryant it was my doing, and I'm afraid it won't mend. Better take up the pieces carefully, though, on the chance." This was thoughtful of Bertie, as the bits were remarkably small. "And here are the flowers—all right, I think. Have you got everything?" He held the door open while she went out with her load, and then he came back rubbing his hands: "Well, are you grateful? You'll never see that again."

Percival surveyed him with a grave smile. "I'm grateful," he said. "But I'd rather you didn't treat all the things which offend my eye in the same way."

Bertie glanced round at the furniture, cheap, mean and shabby: "You think I should have too much smashing to do?"

"I fear it might end in my sitting cross-legged on the floor," said Thorne. "And my successor might cavil at Mrs. Bryant's idea of furnished lodgings."

"Well, I know I've done you a good turn to-day," Bertie rejoined: "my conscience approves of my conduct." And he went off whistling.

Percival, on his way out, met Lydia on the landing. "Miss Bryant, have you a moment to spare?" he said as she went rustling past.

She stopped ungraciously.

"The flower-vase on my table is broken. If you can tell me what it cost I will pay for it."

"Mr. Lisle broke it, didn't he? Emma said—"

"No matter," said Thorne: "it was done in my room. It is no concern of Mr. Lisle's. Can you tell me?"

Lydia hesitated. Should she let him pay for it? Some faint touch of refinement told her that she should not take money for what she had meant as a love-gift. She looked up and met the utter indifference of his eyes as he stood, purse in hand, before her. She was ashamed of the remembrance that she had tried to attract his attention, and burned to deny it. "Well, then, it was three-and-six," she said.

Percival put the money in her hand. She eyed it discontentedly.

"That's right, isn't it?" he asked in some surprise.

The touch of the coins recalled to her the pleasure with which she had spent her own three-and-sixpence to brighten his room, and she half repented. "Oh, it's right enough," she said. "But I don't know why you should pay for it. Things will get knocked over—"

"I beg your pardon: of course I ought to pay for it," he replied, drawing himself up. He spoke the more decidedly that he knew how it was broken. "But, Miss Bryant, it will not be necessary to replace it. I don't think anything of the kind would be very safe in the middle of my table." And with a bow he went on his way.

Lydia stood where he had left her, fingering his half-crown and shilling with an uneasy sense that there was something very mean about the transaction. Now that she had taken his money she disliked him much more, but, as she *had* taken it, she went away and bought herself a pair of grass-green gloves. From that time forward she always openly declared that she despised Mr. Thorne.

That evening, when they came back from their walk, Lisle asked his companion to lend him a couple of sovereigns. "You shall have them back to-morrow," he said airily. Percival assented as a matter of course. He hardly thought about it at all, and if he had

he would have supposed that there was something to be paid in Miss Lisle's absence. He had still something left of the small fortune with which he had started. It was very little, but he could manage Bertie's two sovereigns with that and the money he had laid aside for Mrs. Bryant's weekly bill.

Percival Thorne, always exact in his accounts, supposed that a time was fixed for the repayment of the loan. He did not understand that his debtor was one of those people who when they say "I will pay you to-morrow," merely mean "I will not pay you to-day."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCERNING SISSY.

PERCIVAL had announced the fact of the Lisles' presence in Bellevue street to Sissy in a carefully careless sentence. Sissy read it, and shivered sadly. Then she answered in a peculiarly bright and cheerful letter. "I'm not fit for him," she thought as she wrote it. "I don't understand him, and I'm always afraid. Even when he loved me best I felt as if he loved some dream-girl and took me for her in his dream, and would be angry with me when he woke. Miss Lisle would not be afraid. It is the least I can do for Percival, not to stand in the way of his happiness—the least I can do, and oh, how much the hardest!" So she gave Thorne to understand that she was getting on remarkably well.

It was not altogether false. She had fallen from a dizzy height, but she had found something of rest and security in the valley below. And as prisoners cut off from all the larger interests of their lives pet the plants and creatures which chance to lighten their captivity, so did Sissy begin to take pleasure in little gayeties for which she had not cared in old days. She could sleep now at night without apprehension, and she woke refreshed. There was a great blank in her existence where the thunderbolt fell, but the cloud which hung so blackly overhead was gone. The lonely life was sad, but it held nothing quite so dreadful as the

fear that a day might come when Percival and his wife would know that they stood on different levels—that she could not see with his eyes nor understand his thoughts—when he would look at her with sorrowful patience, and she would die slowly of his terrible kindness. The lonely life was sad, but, after all, Sissy Langton would not be twenty-one till April.

Percival read her letter, and asked Godfrey Hammond how she really was. "Tell me the truth," he said: "you know all is over between us. She writes cheerfully. Is she better than she was last year?"

Hammond replied that Sissy was certainly better. "She has begun to go out again, and Fordborough gossip says that there is something between her and young Hardwicke. He is a good fellow, and I fancy the old man will leave him very well off. But she might do better, and there are two people, at any rate, who do not think anything will come of it—myself and young Hardwicke."

Percival hoped not, indeed.

A month later Hammond wrote that there was no need for Percival to excite himself about Henry Hardwicke. Mrs. Falconer had taken Sissy and Laura to a dance at Latimer's Court, and Sissy's conquests were innumerable. Young Walter Latimer and a Captain Fothergill were the most conspicuous victims. "I believe Latimer rides into Fordborough every day, and the captain, being stationed there, is on the spot. Our St. Cecilia looks more charming than ever, but what she thinks of all this no one knows. Of course Latimer would be the better match, as far as money goes—he is decidedly better-looking, and, I should say, better-tempered—but Fothergill has an air about him which makes his rival look countrified, so I suppose they are tolerably even. Neither is overweighted with brains. What do you think? Young Garnett cannot say a civil word to either of them, and wants to give Sissy a dog. He is not heart-whole either, I take it."

Hammond was trying to probe his correspondent's heart. He flattered him-

self that he should learn something from Percival, let him answer how he would. But Percival did not answer at all. The fact was, he did not know what to say. It seemed to him that he would give anything to hear that Sissy was happy, and yet—

Nor did Sissy understand herself very well. Her grace and sweetness attracted Latimer and Fothergill, and a certain gentle indifference piqued them. She was not sad, lest sadness should be a reproach to Percival. In truth, she hardly knew what she wished. One day she came into the room and overheard the fag-end of a conversation between Mrs. Middleton and a maiden aunt of Godfrey Hammond's who had come to spend the day. "You know," said the visitor, "I never could like Mr. Percival Thorne as much as—"

Sissy paused on the threshold, and Miss Hammond stopped short. The color mounted to her wintry cheek, and she contrived to find an opportunity to apologize a little later: "I beg your pardon, my dear, for my thoughtless remark just as you came in. I know so little that my opinion was worthless. I really beg your pardon."

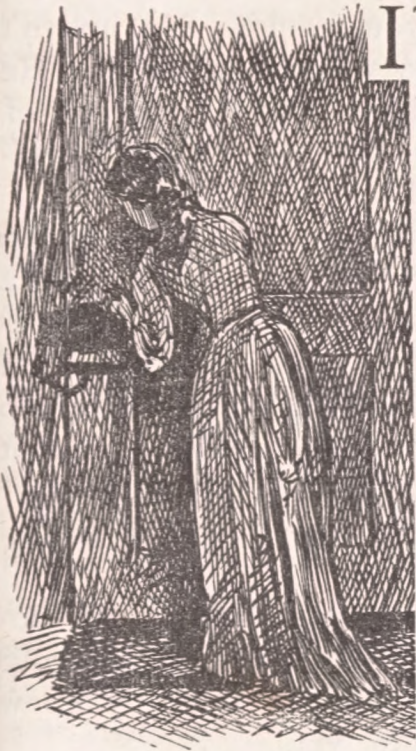
"What for?" said Sissy. "For what you said about Percival Thorne? My dear Miss Hammond, people can't be expected to remember *that*. Why, we agreed that it should be all over and done with at least a hundred years ago." She spoke with hurried bravery.

The old lady looked at her and held out her hands: "My dear, is the time always so long since you parted?"

Sissy put the proffered hands airily aside and scoffed at the idea. They had a crowd of callers that afternoon, but the girl lingered more than once by Miss Hammond's side and paid her delicate little attentions. This perplexed young Garnett very much when he had ascertained from one of the company that the old woman had nothing but an annuity of three hundred a year. He hoped that Sissy Langton wasn't a little queer, but, upon his word, it looked like it.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SHORT RECKONINGS MAKE LONG FRIENDS.



IT was the first of March, and a wild wind was hurrying fragments of white cloud across the blue. Percival had taken his breakfast in snatches, performing on his bell meanwhile. Emma had not brought his boots, and would not so

much as come to be told that he wanted them. At last, despairing, he went out on the landing and shouted his request to her as she shuffled on some errand below. Turning to go back, he met Miss Lisle, who had just come down the stairs behind him.

They stood for a moment exchanging trivial remarks. To them came a stout, fresh-colored, peculiarly innocent-looking old man, who went by with a beaming smile and a slight bow.

"That's Mr. Fordham," said Judith: "I don't think I ever saw him so close before."

"No: one hardly meets him from one week's end to another. He is unusually late this morning."

"He *looks* a very quiet, steady— Really, one might take him for rather a nice old man."

Percival stared blankly at her, and then began to laugh: "Well, Miss Lisle, I never heard a reputation blighted so completely by a complimentary sentence before."

Judith blushed a little: "But he isn't very nice, is he?"

"I don't know about *nice*. I should

say he was as steady and harmless an old fellow as ever lived. What *do* you mean?"

"Well," Judith hesitated, "of course one has no business to judge any one without really knowing; but his staying out so late at night—"

"So late at night?" Percival repeated.

"I suppose he has a latch-key generally. But one or two nights I am sure Miss Bryant sat up to let him in. I heard them whispering: at least, I heard her. I don't think that girl could even whisper quietly."

"But there must be some mistake. Fordham comes in quite early, and very often he doesn't go out at all in the evening."

"He goes out later," said Judith.

"Indeed, no. I could time all his movements. His room is next to mine, and the wall is not so thick as I could wish. He snores sometimes."

"But—" she persisted, looking scared and white, yet what was Fordham to her?—"but I have heard him over and over again, Mr. Thorne. I can't be mistaken."

Percival was disconcerted too. He looked at the carpet, at his slippered feet—at anything but her face: "You have heard some one, I suppose: I don't know who comes in late. Not poor old Fordham." He heard Emma on the stairs, and hurried to meet her. Coming back with his boots in his hand, he found Judith standing exactly as he had left her.

"I'm sure I beg Mr. Fordham's pardon," she said with a smile. "One does make curious mistakes, certainly. That nice-looking old man!" And nodding farewell to young Thorne, she went away.

He did not see her again for two days, though he watched anxiously for her. Bertie came in and out, and was much as usual. On the third evening, as Per-

cival was going up stairs, she called after him: "Mr. Thorne."

He turned eagerly.

"You lent Bertie some money a day or two since?"

Something in her voice or her look made Percival sure that Lisle had borrowed and spent it without her knowledge, and that it was a trouble to her. After all, what did it matter? He would sell his watch and pay Mrs. Bryant. He could not deny Bertie's debt, since she had found it out, but he could make light of it. So he nodded: "Yes, by the way, I believe I did: he hadn't his purse or something." This in a tone of airy indifference.

"Tell me how much it was, please, and I'll pay it back." Then he saw that her purse was open in her hand.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Percival said: "don't pay me off in such a quick, business-like way, Miss Lisle. I'm not the milkman, nor yet the washing. Bertie will settle with me one of these days."

"Please tell me, Mr. Thorne. I mean to pay it: I must."

"Well, I'll ask him about it, then."

"*You* know," with a look of reproach and pleading.

Percival could not deceive her, she looked so sorrowfully resolute. He met the glance of her gray eyes. "Two pounds," he said; and was certain that she was relieved at the answer.

"Bertie wasn't sure it wasn't two pounds ten."

"On my honor, no. He asked me for a couple of sovereigns, and I took it literally."

"If you say so, I am sure. I didn't doubt you: I only told you that you might understand why I asked." She put the money, a sovereign and two halves, into his unwilling hand. Then he understood her relief, for, looking down into the little sealskin purse, he saw that there was no more gold in it. The last ten shillings must have been counted out in silver, and he was not quite sure it would not have ended in a threepenny piece and some halfpence.

"Now I am going to ask a favor," she said. "Don't lend Bertie any more,

please. He has been used to spend just what he liked, and he doesn't think, poor boy! And it is only wasted. Don't let him have any more."

"But, Miss Lisle," said Percival, "if your brother asks me do you mean that I am to say 'No'?"

"Please, if you would. He mustn't be extravagant: we can't afford it. He can't pay you back, and if I lost any of my work—Mrs. Barton's lessons, for instance—I couldn't either."

"*You* work to pay *me*!" exclaimed Percival aghast: "I won't hear of such a thing. Miss Lisle, you mustn't! It's between Bertie and myself, and I shouldn't be ruined if he didn't pay me till his ship comes home one of these days. Take it back, please, and he and I will arrange it."

She shook her head: "No: my brother's debts are mine."

"Ah!" said Percival, with a swift, eloquent glance. "Then let me be your creditor a little longer: I hardly know what it feels like, yet."

"Since when has *your* ship come home, Mr. Thorne, that you can afford to be so generous?"

The blood mounted to his forehead at her question, but he answered quickly: "My ship has not come home. Perhaps if it had I should not dare to ask you to let me help you. I feel as if our poverty made us all nearer together."

"It is not every one who would say so in your place," Judith replied. "I *am* your debtor for those words. But we Lisles have wronged you too much already: you shouldn't try to make the load heavier."

"Wronged me?" he faltered.

"Did you think I did not know? My father had your money and ruined you: deny it if you can! I suspected it, and lately I have been sure. Oh, if Bertie and I could pay you back! But meanwhile he shall not borrow from you and waste your earnings on his silly whims. If you lend him any more you may try to hide it from me, but I shall find it out, and I will pay it—every farthing. I will find some way, if I have to sit up every night for a week and work my fingers to the bone."

"God forbid!" said Percival. "He shall have no more from me. But be generous, and promise me that if you *should* want help, such as my poverty can give, you will forget old times and come to me."

"No, I won't promise that. I will remember them and come." She caught his hand, pressed it one moment in her own, flung it from her and escaped.

"Judith!" he called after her, but she was gone.

Percival went into his own room. The money had come just in time, for his landlady's weekly account was lying on the table. He looked at the three coins with lingering tenderness, and after a moment's hesitation he took one of them and vowed that he would never part with it. Yet in the midst of his ardent resolution he smiled rather bitterly to think that it was not the sovereign, but one of the halves, he meant to keep for ever. Poverty had taught him many lessons, and among them how to combine economy and sentiment. "If she had given me the ten shillings' worth of silver, I suppose I should have saved the threepenny bit!" he said to himself as he locked his little remembrance in his desk.

A couple of days later, as he was walking home with Bertie, they passed three or four men who were sauntering idly along, and Thorne felt sure that his companion received and returned a silent glance of recognition. He glanced over his shoulder at them, and disliked their look exceedingly. "Do you know who those fellows were we passed just now?" he said.

Bertie looked back: "One is the brother of a man in our choir."

"Hm! I wouldn't have one of them for my brother at any price," said Percival. The matter dropped, but he could not forget it. He fancied that there was a slight change in Bertie himself—that the boy's face was keener and haggard, and there was an anxious expression in his eyes. But he owned frankly that he was not at all sure that he should have noticed anything if his suspicions had not been previously aroused.

"Come in this evening," said Bertie when they went up stairs. He leant

against the door of Percival's room, and as his friend hesitated he called to his sister: "Here, Judith! tell Thorne to come and have some tea with us: they've let his fire out, and his room is as warm and cheerful as a sepulchre."

"Do you think I order other people about as I do you?" she replied.—"Will you come, Mr. Thorne? I can, at any rate, promise you a fire and a welcome."

When she met him she was quite calm, tranquil and clear-eyed. Do the ripples of the summer sea recall that distant line, the supreme effort of wind and tide some stormy night? Percival would have thought that it had been all a dream but for the little coin which that wave had flung at his feet for a remembrance. And he had called after her "Judith!" The tide had ebbed, and he did not even think of her as other than Miss Lisle. Had she heard him that evening? He would almost have hoped not, but that twilight moment seemed so far away that it must be absurd to link it with his every-day life.

Apparently, she and Bertie were on their usual footing. Did the young fellow know of that absurd mistake about old Fordham? Did Percival really detect a shade of dim apprehension on Judith Lisle's face, as if she hid an unspoken fear? As Bertie leant forward and the lamplight shone on his clearly-cut features, Percival was more than ever certain of the change in him. Could his sister fail to see it?

"Bertie," she said when they had finished their tea and were standing round the fire—"Bertie, I'm afraid you have lost one of your pupils."

He had his elbow on the chimney-piece, his hand hung loosely open, and his eyes were fixed upon the leaping flames. When Judith spoke he looked up inquiringly.

"Miss Nash—Emmeline Nash," said Judith.

Percival happened to be looking at the fire too, and he suddenly saw Bertie's fingers drawn quickly up. But the young master spoke very composedly indeed: "Emmeline Nash—why? Has anything happened?"

"No: only Mr. Nash has given in at last, and says she may go home at Easter for good.—She is older than any of the other pupils, Mr. Thorne: in fact, she is not treated as a pupil. But her father is—"

"An old fossil," said Bertie.

"Well!—interested in fossils and that sort of thing, and a widower; so there has not been much of a home for her, and he always fancied she was better at school. But school can't last for ever."

"Happiest time of one's life!" Bertie ejaculated.

"Oh! do you think so?" said Judith doubtfully.

"Not at all. But I believe it is the right thing to say."

"Stupid boy!—And as she will very soon be twenty, I really think she ought not to be kept there any longer."

"Of course Miss Nash is delighted," said Percival.

"Yes, but hardly as much so as I expected. One's castles in the air don't look quite the same when one is close to them. I am afraid her home-life won't be very bright."

"Perhaps she will make it brighter," said Thorne. "What is she like? Is she pretty?"

"Yes," said Bertie.

Judith smiled: "One has to qualify all one's adjectives for her. She is nice-ish, pretty-ish: I doubt if she is as much as clever-ish."

"No need for her to be any more," Bertie remarked. "Didn't Miss Crawford say she would come in for a lot of money—some of her mother's—when she was one-and-twenty?"

"Yes, five or six hundred a year."

"That's why he has kept her at school, I suppose—afraid she should take up with a curate, very likely."

"Mr. Nash is very rich too, and she is an only child," said Judith, ignoring Bertie's remark. "But I think it has been hard on Emmeline."

"Well, I'm sorry she is going," said Lisle—"very sorry."

"Is she such a promising pupil?" Thorne inquired.

"She's a nice girl," said Bertie, "but

a promising pupil— O Lord!" He flew to the piano, played an air in a singularly wooden manner, and then dragged it languidly, yet laboriously, up and down the keys. "Variations, you perceive." After a little more of this treatment the unfortunate melody grew very lame indeed, and finally died of exhaustion. "That's Miss Emmeline Nash," said Bertie, spinning round on the music-stool and confronting Percival.

"It is very like Emmeline's style of playing," Judith owned.

"Of course it is. Let's have something else for a change." And turning back to the piano, he began to sing. Then he called Judith to come and take her turn. She sang well, and Percival, by the fireside, noted the young fellow's evident pride in her performance, and admired the pair. (Any one else might have admired the three, for Thorne's grave, foreign-looking face was just the fitting contrast to the Lisles' fair, clear features. The morbid depression of a couple of months earlier had passed, and left him far more like the Percival of Brackenhill. Poverty surrounded the friends and dulled their lives, but as yet it was only a burden, not a blight.)

"You sing," said Bertie, looking back. "I remember you were great at some of those old songs. I'll play for you: what shall it be?"

"I'm sure I hardly know," said Percival, coming forward.

"Let's have 'Shall I, wasting in despair,'" Lisle suggested. "It has been going in my head all this morning." He played a few notes.

"No, no!" the other exclaimed hurriedly—"not that." Too well he remembered the tender devotion of more than a year before:

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve.

Sissy and Brackenhill rose before him—the melancholy orchard-walk, the little hands which lay in his on that November day. He felt a dull pain, yet what could he do? what could he have done? There was a terrible mistake somewhere, but he could not say where. If he had married Sissy, would it not have been

there? He woke up suddenly. Young Lisle was speaking, and Judith was saying, "Let Mr. Thorne choose."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Percival. "Shall it be 'Drink to me only with thine eyes'?"

He sang it well. His voice was strong and full, and the sweet old-fashioned courtesy of compliment suited him exactly. The last word had scarcely left his lips when the door opened, and Emma showed in Mr. Clifton of St. Sylvester's.

The clergyman came forward, black-coated, smooth-shaven, with watchful glances which seemed ever looking out for that lay co-operation we hear so much of now. Lisle looked over his shoulder and sprang up to receive him. The visitor tried to get his umbrella and two or three books into the hand which already held his hat, and one little volume fell to the floor. Percival picked it up and smoothed the pages. "Mr. Thorne—Mr. Clifton," said the young organist as the book was restored to its owner. Percival bowed gravely, and Mr. Clifton did not shake hands, as he would have done if the young man's manner had been less reserved. He was lavish of such greetings. A clergyman might shake hands with any one.

"I'll not detain you long, Lisle," he said. "But I wanted to speak to you about the choir-practice to-morrow." And there ensued a little business-talk between parson and organist. Judith took up a bit of work and Percival leant against the chimney-piece. Presently Lisle went back to the piano and tried over a hymn-tune which Mr. Clifton had brought. The clergyman stood solemnly by. "I met Gordon a few minutes ago," he said. "He was with his brother and some other men of the same stamp. If he mixes himself up with that set, he must go."

"You'll miss him in the choir, Mr. Clifton," said Bertie.

"He must choose between such associates and the choir," the other replied. The words were moderate enough, but the tone was austere.

"Especially at Easter," said Bertie, still playing.

"What of that?" demanded the other. "I would rather have no choir at St. Sylvester's than have men in it whose way of life during the week made a mockery of the praises they sang on Sundays."

He spoke in a low voice, and Bertie's playing partially covered the conversation. "Perhaps, Mr. Clifton, if Gordon understood how much you disapproved—" the young organist began.

"Gordon? Gordon? it isn't only Gordon who should understand. Every one should understand my feeling on such a subject without my having to explain it. But I won't keep you any longer now: it is getting late. Remember, seven o'clock to-morrow evening." And with a polite remark or two to the others Mr. Clifton bowed himself out, with Bertie in attendance. The procession of two might have been more dignified if the organist had not made a face at Judith and Percival as he went out at the door, and if he had not danced a fantastic but noiseless dance on the landing behind the incumbent of St. Sylvester's, who was feeling feebly in the dim light for the top step of Mrs. Bryant's staircase.

"Is anything the matter with Mr. Clifton?" Judith asked when the boy came back and executed another war-dance all round the room. "He didn't seem pleased, I thought."

Bertie brought himself up with a grand flourish opposite the arm-chair, and sank into it: "Bless you, no! there's nothing the matter with him. Tumbled out of bed the wrong side this morning—that's all. He does sometimes."

"Might have got over that by this time of night, one would think," said Percival, looking at his watch.

"Hold hard! you aren't going yet?" exclaimed Bertie, bounding up.—"Here, Judith, let's have another song to take the taste of old Clifton out of our mouths. Whatever possessed him to come here to-night?"

They had two or three songs instead of one, and then Percival went off. Judith put her work away, shut up the piano and laid Bertie's music straight. He stood meanwhile with his back to the dying fire,



"DRINK TO ME ONLY WITH THINE EYES,"—Page 201.

idly chinking some money which he had taken from his waistcoat-pocket, a half-crown and two or three shillings. His brows were drawn down as if he were

lost in thought. Presently, his half-crown went spinning in the air: he caught it dexterously—heads. Bertie half smiled to himself, as who should say, "Well, if

Destiny will have it so, what am I that I should resist it?"

It is very well to toss up if you have already come to a decision which you cannot quite justify. Should the verdict be adverse, it is no worse than it was before, for if you have really made up your mind so trivial an accident will not stop you. It may even be your duty to show that you attach no superstitious importance to it. And, on the other hand, if chance favors you, some of your burden of responsibility is transferred to the shoulders of Fate.

So Bertie smiled, pocketed his half-crown, kissed his sister and went off to his own room, whistling on his way thither with peculiar distinctness and perseverance.

Nearly an hour later two figures stood by the dim light in the passage and conversed in whispers:

"Now, my charming Lydia, how about that key?"

"I'll 'charming Lydia' you!" was the reply. "I like your impudence!"

"I know you do. You shall have some more when I've time to spare. But now I must really be off. Get me the key, there's a dear girl."

"I can't, then. If you want a latch-key, why don't you go to ma and say so like a man? There it is, and you'd have it directly."

"O most unreasonable Lydia! How many times must I explain to you that that wouldn't do, because your ma, while she possesses many of the charms, is not quite exempt from the weakness of her sex: in short, Lydia, she talks."

"Well, what then? If I were a man I wouldn't be afraid of my sister. I'd be my own master."

"So will I," said Bertie Lisle.

"And I'd say what I meant right out. I would!"

"If you knew there'd be a fuss, and people anxious about you, would you?" He yawned. "No: I'll be my own master, but I like to do things quietly."

"I don't care so much about that," said Lydia, whose feelings were less delicate. To struggle openly for an avowed object seemed to her the most

natural thing in the world, and she would have preferred her independence to be conspicuous. She did not understand that with men of Bertie's stamp it is not the latch-key itself, but the unsuspected latch-key, which confers the liberty they love.

"Well?" said he. "Am I to stay here all night?"

"That's just what you'd better do. You won't get any good out of that lot; and so I tell you. You'll lose your money and get into nasty drinking ways: don't you go there any more."

"Upon my word, Lydia, you preach as well as old Clifton does."

"And do you just as much good, I dare say."

"Just as much. You've hit it exactly."

"I thought so. You aren't the sort to take any heed. One may preach and preach—"

"How well you understand me! No, as you say, I am not the sort to get any good from preaching. You are quite right, Lydia: my character requires kindness, sympathy and a latch-key—especially requires a latch-key."

"Especially requires a fiddlestick!" said Lydia; and, disregarding his smiling "Not at all," she went on in an injured tone: "There's ma worrying over accounts, and likely to worry for the next hour. How am I to get a key from under her very nose?"

Lisle seemed to reflect: "Old Fordham doesn't have one, I suppose."

"Gracious! No, not he! If you gave him one he'd drop it as if it was red hot. He thinks they're wicked."

There was a pause, but after a few moments there stole through the silence a sweetly insinuating voice: "Then, Lydia—"

Lydia half turned away and put up her left shoulder.

"Then, Lydia, I suppose you wouldn't—"

"You'd better keep on supposing I wouldn't."

"Can't suppose such cruelty for more than a moment—can't really. No, listen to me"—this with a change of voice: "I must go out this evening. Upon my

soul, it's important. I'm in a fix, Lydia. I've not breathed a word to any one else, and wouldn't for worlds, but you'll not let it out, I know. If I'm lucky enough to get out of the scrape to-night, I'll never get into it again, I can tell you."

"You will," said Lydia.

"I swear I won't. And if not—"

"Well? if not?"

"Why, I must try another plan to get free. I sha'n't like it, but I must. But there'll be a row, and I shall have to go away. I'd a good deal rather not."

"What sort of plan?" she asked curiously.

"Desperate," he answered, and shook his head.

"What is it?" Her eyes were widely opened in excitement and alarm. "You ain't going to be driven to forge something, like people in novels? Or—or—it isn't a big robbery, is it? Oh, you wouldn't!"

The face opposite looked so smiling and candid and innocent that it made the words she had hazarded an obvious absurdity, even to herself, as soon as she had uttered them.

"Why not a murder?" said Lisle. "I think it shall be a murder. Upon my word, you're complimentary! No, no, I don't mean to try my hand at any of them." She smiled, relieved. "But I must go out to-night. Lydia, will you let me in once more?"

"Once more? You won't ask again?"

"Never again."

There was a pause: "Didn't you say that last time?"

"Lydia, you are the unkindest girl—"

"Well, then, I will."

"No, you are the kindest."

"Just this once more. Mind, you tap very gently, and I'll be awake. But do be careful. It frightens me so!"

When the house was full of lodgers the Bryants stowed themselves away in any odd corners. At this time Lydia occupied a large cupboard—by courtesy called a small room—close to their stuffy little back parlor. Lisle would go to the yard behind the house, which was common to two or three besides No. 13, and with one foot on a projecting bit of brick-

work could get his hand on the sill and make his signal.

"Some day the police 'll take you for a burglar," said Lydia encouragingly. "Well, go and enjoy yourself."

"It is a shame to keep you up so long, isn't it? What do you do all the time, eh, Lydia?"

"Sit in the dark, mostly, and think what a fool I'm making of myself."

"Don't do that. Think how good you are to a poor fellow in trouble. That will be better—won't it? But I must be off. Good-bye, you kind Lydia."

He stooped forward and kissed her, taking her hands in his. He found it convenient to pay his debt in this coin, his creditor being passably pretty. Not that Bertie had any taste for indiscriminate kissing. Had he had five thousand a year, and had Lydia rendered him a service, he would have recompensed her with some of his superfluous gold. But as he only had his salary as organist and what he could make by giving music-lessons, he paid her with kisses instead. He had no particular objection, and was it not his duty to be economical, for Judith's sake as well as his own?

"Go along with you!" said Lydia; and the young man, who had achieved his purpose and had no reason for prolonging the interview, stole laughingly down stairs, waving a farewell as he vanished round the corner. Lydia stood as if she were rooted to the ground, listening intently. She heard the door opened very gently and closed with infinite precautions. She still stood till she had counted a hundred under her breath, and then, judging that Mrs. Bryant had not been disturbed by his stealthy exit, she went down to fasten it. She was prepared with an answer if she should be caught in the act, but she was glad to get away undetected, for an excuse which is perfectly satisfactory at the time may be very unsatisfactory indeed when viewed by the light of later events. So Lydia rejoiced when she found herself safe in her own room, though she pursued her usual train of meditation in that refuge. She appraised Lisle's gratitude and kisses

pretty accurately, and was angry with herself that she should care to have them, knowing that they were worthless. Yet as she sat there she said his name to herself, "Bertie," as she had heard his sister call him. And she knew well that it was pleasant to her to be thrilled by Bertie's eyes and lips, pleasant to feel Bertie's soft palms and slim strong fingers pressing those hands of hers, on which she had just been trying experiments with a new wash. Lydia looked thoughtfully into her looking-glass and took her reflection into her confidence. "Ain't you a silly?" she said to the phantom which fingered its long curl and silently moved its lips. "Oh, you are!" said the girl, "and there's no denying it." She shook her head, and her *vis-à-vis* shook its head in the dim dusk, as much as to say, "No more a fool than you are yourself, Lydia." — "Nobody could be," said Lydia moodily.

She did not deem it prudent to keep her light burning very late, and she had a long vigil before the signal came, the three soft taps at her window. She was prepared for it. Every sound had grown painfully distinct to her anxious ears, and she had been almost certain that she knew Lisle's hurried yet stealthy step as he turned into the yard. She crept to the door and opened it, her practised hand recognizing the fastenings in the dark. The light from the street-lamp just outside fell on Bertie's white face. "What luck?" she asked in a whisper.

"Curse the luck!" he answered: "everything went against me from first to last."

"I told you so," she whispered, closing the door. "Didn't I say that?"

"Don't! there's a good girl," said Bertie softly, somewhere in the shadows.

Lydia was silent, and shot the bolts very skilfully. But the key made a little grating noise as she turned it, and the two stood for a moment holding their breath.

"All right," said Lisle after a pause.

"It's late," said Lydia. He could not deny it. "You must take your boots off before you go up," she continued. "And do be careful."

He obeyed. "Good-night," he whispered. "You'll see that girl calls me in

good time to-morrow? I feel as if I should sleep for a century or so." He yawned wearily: "I wish I could."

"I ain't to be sleepy, I suppose: why should I be?" she answered, but added hurriedly, "No, no, you shall be called all right."

"You good girl!" whispered Lisle, and he went noiselessly away. A dim gas-light burned halfway up the stairs and guided him to his room. He had only to softly open and close his door, and all was well. Judith had not been awakened by the catlike steps of the man who was not old Fordham. She had fallen asleep very happily, with a vague sense of hopefulness and well-being. She had no idea that Bertie had just flung himself on his bed to snatch a little rest, with a trouble on his mind which, had she known it, would have effectually banished sleep from her eyes, and a hope of escape which would have nearly broken her heart. Her burden had been laid aside for a few hours, and through her dreams there ran a golden thread of melody, the unconscious remembrance of that evening's songs and music.

CHAPTER XL.

BERTIE AT THE ORGAN.

BERTIE was duly called, and came down the next morning punctually enough, but somewhat weary and pale. A slight headache was supposed to account for his looks. Lydia complained of the same thing over her breakfast of bacon down stairs. But Fate was partial, for Bertie's marble pallor and the faint shadow beneath his eyes were utterly unlike poor Lydia's dull complexion and heavy, red-rimmed eyelids. She was conscious of this injustice, and felt in a dim way that she had proved herself capable of one of those acts of self-devotion which are the more admirable that they are sure not to be admired. But the longer she thought of it the more she felt that this noble deed was not one to be repeated. One must set bounds to one's heroism. "I can't go on losing my beauty-sleep in this fashion," said Lydia to herself.

"I do look such a horrid fright the next day."

When Judith had gone to Standon Square, Bertie yawned, stretched himself, got out his little writing-case and sat down to write a letter. He spent some time over it, erasing and interlining, balancing himself on two legs of his chair, while he looked for stray words on the ceiling or murmured occasional sentences to judge of the effect. At last it was finished, and, being copied in a dashing hand, looked very spontaneous indeed. "I think that ought to do it," he said to himself as he smoked his pipe, glancing over the pages: "I think it *will* do it." He smiled in the pride of triumphant authorship, but presently there came a line between his brows and a puzzled expression to his face: "I'll be shot if I know how it is to be managed afterward. People do it, but how? I wonder if Thorne knows? If law is at all catching, a year of that musty office must have given him a touch of it." Lisle considered the matter for a few minutes, and then shrugged his shoulders: "It won't do, I'm afraid. I dare-n't try him. I'm never quite clear how much he sees and understands, nor what he would do. And Gordon? No." There was another reverie. Finally, he arose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and stretched himself once more: "I've got to depend on myself, it seems to me. I must set my wits to work and astonish them all. But oh, if yawning were but a lucrative employment, how easily I could make money and be quit of the whole affair!"

Bertie took a great interest in his personal appearance, and was frank and unaffected in his consciousness of his good looks. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the bottle-green mirror, and stopped short in considerable anxiety. "Brain-work and these late hours don't suit me," he said. "Good Heavens! I look quite careworn. Well, it may pass for the effect of a gradually breaking heart: why not?"

A glance at his watch roused him to sudden activity. He carefully burnt every scrap of his original manuscript, feel-

ing sure that Lydia would read his letter if she had the chance. He looked leniently on this little weakness of hers. "Very happy to afford you what little amusement I can in the general way," he soliloquized as he directed an envelope, "but I really can't allow you to read this letter, Lydia my dear." Apparently, he was in a distrustful mood, for, after hesitating a moment, he got some wax and sealed it with a ring he wore. Then, putting it carefully in his pocket, he tossed a few sheets of blotted music-paper on the table, left his writing-case wide open, took his hat and a roll of music, and went out in the direction of St. Sylvester's, trying to work out his problem as he walked. He was not, however, so deep in thought that he had no eyes for the passers-by, and his attention was suddenly attracted by a servant-girl dawdling along the opposite pavement. He watched her keenly, but furtively, as if to make quite sure, and when she turned down a side street he followed, and speedily overtook her.

"This is lucky!" he ejaculated. "I didn't expect to see you, Susan. What are you doing here?"

She was a slight, plain girl, with a fairly intelligent face whose expression was doubtful. Sometimes it showed a willingness to please, oftener it was sullen, now and then merely thoughtful. Just at this moment, as she looked up at the young organist, it was crafty and greedy. "I'm taking a note," she said. "Miss Crawford's always a-sending me with notes or something."

"You don't mind being sent with notes, do you?" said Bertie blandly.

"That's as may be," the girl answered.

"I should have thought it was pleasant work. At any rate, it's as easy to take two as one, isn't it?"

"I have to take 'em, 'cause I'm paid to, you see, easy or not."

"Oh, of course you ought to be paid." His fingers were in his waistcoat-pocket, and some coins that chinked agreeably were transferred to her hand, together with the sealed letter. "You've saved me a walk to Standon Square," he said.

The girl laughed, looking down at

her money: "It wouldn't have hurt you, I dare say. You oughtn't to make much of a walk there. How about an answer?"

"Oh, I shall get an answer when I come to-morrow." He nodded a careless farewell, and went a little out of his way to avoid Gordon's brother, who was visible in the distance.

Susan turned the missive over in her hand. "It's sealed tight enough," she remarked to herself. "What did he want to do that for?" She eyed it discontentedly: "I hate such suspicious ways. Wouldn't there be a flare-up if I just handed it over to the old maid? I won't, though, for she's give me warning, and he's a deal more free with his money than she'd ever be—stingy old cat! But wouldn't there be a flare-up? My!" And Susan, who had an ungratified taste for the sensational, looked at the address and smiled to think of the power she possessed.

Before she slipped the letter into her pocket she sniffed doubtfully at the envelope, and tossed her head in scorn: "I thought so! Smells of tobacco." It was true, for Lisle, as we know, had smoked while he revised his composition. "If I were a young man going a-courting I'd scent my letters with rose or something nice, and I'd write 'em on pink paper—I would!" Susan reflected. But Lisle was wiser. There is no perfume for a young ladies' school like a whiff of cigar-smoke. To that prim, half convent-like seclusion, where manners are being formed and the proprieties are strictly observed, it comes as a pleasant suggestion of something worldly and masculine, just a little wicked and altogether delightful.

So Lisle went on his way to St. Sylvester's, lighter of heart for having met Susan and got rid of the letter. While it was still in his pocket nothing was absolutely settled, in spite of that half-crown which had represented inexorable Destiny the night before. But now that it was gone, further thought about it was happily unnecessary, and honor forbade him to draw back. It was true, however, that he was still face to face with the difficulty

which had been in his mind when he met his messenger so conveniently.

He caught a street Arab, and promised him twopence if he would come and blow for him while he practised. But he began by playing absently and carelessly, for since the letter had been despatched his problem had become infinitely more urgent, and it thrust itself between him and the music. His fingers roved dreamily over the keys, his eyes wandered, as if in spite of himself, to the east end of the church. All at once he came out with an impatient "How *do* people manage it?" and he finished the muttered question with a strong word and a big chord.

A moment more, and his face is illuminated with the inward light of a sudden idea. He lets his hands lie where they happen to be, he sits there with parted lips and startled eyes. The idea is almost too wonderful, too simple, too obvious, and yet—"By Jove!" says Bertie, under his breath.

His street Arab means to earn his twopence, and in spite of the silence he pumps away in a cheerful and conscientious manner till he shall be bidden to stop. The organ protests in a long and dolorous note, and startles the musician from his reverie. Forthwith he begins to play a stirring march, and the rejoicing chords arise and rush and crowd beneath his fingers. Has he indeed found the solution of his great perplexity? Apparently he thinks so. He seems absolutely hurried along in triumph on these waves of jubilant harmony. A ray of pale March sunlight falls on his forehead and shines on his hair as he tosses his head in the quickening excitement of the moment. His headache is gone, his weariness is gone. The notes seem to gather like bands of armed men and rush victoriously through the aisles. But even as he plays he laughs to himself, a boyish, happy laugh, for this great idea which is to help him out of all his difficulties is not only a great idea, but a great joke. And the march rings louder yet, for with every note he plays his thought grows clearer to his mind, plainer and

more feasible. There is a gay audacity about the laugh which lingers in Bertie's eyes and on his lips, as if Dan Cupid himself had just been there, whispering some choice scheme of roguish knavery, some artful artlessness, into the young man's ear. Bertie does not acknowledge that his inspiration has come in such a questionable fashion. He says to himself, "It will do: I feel it will do. Isn't it providential? Just when I was in despair!" This is a more suitable sentiment for an organist, no doubt, for what possible business can Dan Cupid have at St. Sylvester's? Louder and louder yet pours the great stream of music; and that is a joke too, for Lisle feels as if he were shouting his secret to the four winds, and yet keeping it locked in his inmost soul, taking the passers-by into his confidence in the most open-hearted fashion, and laughing at them in his sleeve. But the musician is exhausted at last, and the end comes with a thundering crash of chords.

"Here, boy—here's sixpence for you: you may be off. We've done enough for to-day, and may go home to Bellevue street." But it seems to Bertie Lisle, as he picks up his roll of music and comes down the aisle, that Bellevue street too is only a joke now.

CHAPTER XLI.

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY.

APRIL had come, and the best of the year was beginning with a yellow dawn of daffodils. The trees stood stern and wintry, but there were little leaves on the honeysuckles and the hawthorn hedges, glad outbursts of song among the branches, and soft, shy caresses in the air. Sissy Langton, riding into Fordborough, was delicately beautiful as spring itself. She missed her squire of an earlier April, and his absence made an underlying sadness in her radiant eyes which had the April charm. That day her glance and smile had an especial brightness, partly because spring had come, and, though countless springs have passed away, each comes with the

old yet ever-fresh assurance that it will make all things new; partly because it was her birthday, and while we are yet young there is a certain joy of royalty which marks our birthday mornings; but most of all because that day gave her the power to satisfy a desire which had lain hidden in her heart through the long winter months.

It was the Fordborough market-day, and already, though it was but eleven o'clock, the little town was waking up. Sissy, followed by Mrs. Middleton's staid servant, rode straight to the principal street and stopped at Mr. Hardwicke's office. Young Hardwicke, reading the paper in his room, was surprised when a clerk announced that Miss Langton was at the door asking for his father. He forgot the sporting intelligence in an instant: "Well, isn't my father in?"

No: Mr. Hardwicke went out about twenty minutes earlier, and did not say when he should be back. They had told Miss Langton, and she said, "Perhaps Mr. Henry—"

Mr. Henry was off like a shot. He found Sissy on her horse at the door, looking pensively along the street, as if she were studying the effect of dusky red on palest blue—chimney-pots against the April sky.

"So Mr. Hardwicke is out?" she said when they had shaken hands. "I'm so sorry! I wanted him so particularly."

"Is it important? Are you in a great hurry?" said Henry. "He won't be long, or he would certainly have left word—on a market-day especially. Could you come in and wait a little while?" he suggested. "I suppose I shouldn't do as well?"

"I don't know," said Sissy, looking a little doubtfully at the tall, fresh-colored young fellow, who smiled frankly in reply.

"Oh, it isn't at all likely," said Mr. Henry with delightful candor. "The governor can't, for the life of him, understand how I make so many blunders. I've a special talent that way, I suppose, but I don't know how I came by it."

"Then perhaps it had better be Mr. Hardwicke. If it were a waltz, now—"

and she laughed. "But it isn't a waltz: it is something very important. Do you know anything about wills?"

He looked up in sudden apprehension: "Is it about a will? Mrs. Middleton's? Is anything the matter?"

"No, it isn't Aunt Middleton's: it's mine," was the composed reply. But seeing relief, and almost amusement, on his face, she added hastily, "I *can* make a will, can't I? I'm twenty-one, you know: it's my birthday to-day."

"Then I wish you many happy returns of the day."

"Thank you, but can I make a will?"

"Of course you can make a will."

"A will that will be good?" Sissy insisted, still speaking in the low tone she had adopted when she began to explain the object of her visit. "Can I make it here and now?"

"Not on horseback, I think," said Hardwicke with a smile. "You would be tired of sitting here while we took down all your instructions. It isn't very quick work making ladies' wills. They generally leave no end of legacies. I suppose they are so good they don't forget anybody."

"Mine won't be like that: mine will be very short," Sissy said. "And I suppose I am not good, for I shall forget almost everybody in it." She laughed as she said it, yet something in her voice struck Hardwicke as curiously earnest. "I will come in, I think, and tell you about it," she went on. "I want to make it to-day."

"To-day?" he repeated as he helped her to dismount.

"Yes. I'll tell you," said Sissy, entering his room, "and you'll tell Mr. Hardwicke, won't you? I'll get the Elliotts to give me some luncheon, and then I can come here again between two and three. I shall have to sign it, or something, sha'n't I? Do tell your father I want it all to be finished to-day."

"I'll tell him."

"Tell him it's my birthday, so of course I must do just as I please and have everything I want to-day. I don't know whether that's the law, but I'm sure it ought to be."

"Of course it ought to be," Henry replied with fervor. "And I think we can undertake to say that it shall be our law, anyhow."

"Thank you," said Sissy. "I shall be so very glad! - And it can't take long. I only want him to say that I wish all that I have to go to Percival Thorne."

"To Percival?" Hardwicke repeated, with a sensation as if she had suddenly stabbed him. "To Percival Thorne? Yes. Is that all I am to say?"

"That's all. I want it all to be for Percival Thorne, to do just what he likes with it. That can't take long, surely."

Hardwicke bit the end of a penholder that he had picked up, and looked uneasily at her: "You're awfully anxious to get this done, Miss Langton: you aren't ill, are you?"

"Oh, I'm well enough — much better than I was last year," said Sissy lightly. "But there's no good in putting things of this sort off, you know" — she dropped her voice — "as poor Mr. Thorne did. And your father said once that if I didn't make a will when I came of age my money would all go to Sir Charles Langton. He doesn't really want any more, I should think, for they say he is very rich. And he is only a second cousin of mine, and I have never seen him. It's funny, having so few relations, isn't it?"

"Very," said Hardwicke.

"And some people have such a lot," said Sissy thoughtfully. "But I always feel as if the Thornes were my relations."

"I suppose so. At any rate, I don't see that Sir Charles Langton has any claim upon you." There was silence for a minute, Sissy drawing an imaginary outline on Hardwicke's carpet with her riding-whip, he following her every movement with his eyes.

"I shall have to sign both my Christian names, I suppose?" she said abruptly.

"Have you two? I didn't know. What is the other?"

"Jane."

"Jane! I like that," said Henry. "Yes, sign them both."

"Thank you. I don't want to seem

like an idiot to your father. I should like it best if I could just write 'Sissy' and nothing else, as I do at the end of my letters. When I see 'Cecilia Jane Langton' I feel inclined to call out, 'This is none of I!' like the old woman."

She stood up to go: "You won't forget, will you?"

"No, I won't forget."

"Everything to Percival Thorne."

"Percival Thorne is an uncommonly lucky fellow," said the young man, looking down.

Sissy stopped short, glanced at him and colored. In her anxiety she had never considered the light in which the bequest might strike Henry Hardwicke. In fact, she had not thought of him at all except as a messenger. She was accustomed to take him for granted on any occasion. She had known him all her life, and he was always, in her eyes, the big friendly boy with whom she pulled crackers and played blindman's buff at children's parties. She dreamed of no possible romance with Henry, and did not imagine that he could have such a dream about her. He was as harmless as a brother, without a brother's right to question and criticise. It was precisely that feeling which had been at the root of the friendliness which the Fordborough gossips took for a flirtation. They could not have been more utterly mistaken. She liked Henry Hardwicke—she knew that he was honest and honorable and good—but if any one had said that he was a worthy young man, I believe she would have assented. And that is the last adjective which a girl would apply to her ideal.

Sissy's scheme had been in her mind through all the winter, but she had always imagined herself stating her intentions in a business-like way to old Mr. Hardwicke, who was a friend of the family. She had been so thunder-struck when she found that he was out that she had taken Henry into her confidence at a moment's warning. She dared not risk any delay. It would be impossible to go home leaving Percival's future insecure. Suppose she died that night—and she was struck with the

fantastic coincidence of Mr. Hardwicke's second absence at the critical moment—suppose she felt herself dying, and knew that the only thing she could have done for Percival was left undone! She could not face the possibility of that agony. Indeed, she wondered how she had lived through the long hours which had elapsed since the clock struck twelve and the day began which made her twenty-one—not the girl Sissy any longer, but the woman who held Percival's fortune in her hands. How could she have gone away with her purpose unfulfilled?

When Henry said "Percival Thorne is an uncommonly lucky fellow," she colored, but only that transient flush betrayed her, for she answered readily: "Why, Mr. Hardwicke, what a dreadful thing to say to me! I hope you don't have second-sight or anything horrible of that sort?"

"Second-sight!" Henry repeated doubtfully, looking down at a little dangling eye-glass: "what's that?"

"Oh, you must know. Isn't it second-sight when you can tell if people are going to die? You see them in their winding-sheets, and they are low down if it will only be rather soon. But if it is to be quite directly their shrouds are wrapped round them high up. What was mine like, that you said Percival Thorne was so lucky? Up to here?" And, standing before him, she smiled and touched her chin.

"God forbid!" said Henry. "How can you say such fearful things?"

"Oh, you didn't see it, then? I'm very glad."

"Good Heavens! no! And I don't believe it. I didn't mean that Thorne would be lucky if you *died*!"

"I can't do him any good any other way," said Sissy with sweet composure; "but I don't think I'm going to die, so I don't suppose I shall do him any good at all. Do you think this is a strange fancy of mine? The truth is, Aunt Middleton and I have been unhappy about Percival ever since last May, because we know his grandfather meant to have done something for him. He isn't rich, and he ought to have had Brackenhill;

so I should like him to have my money if I die. It is only a chance, because I dare say I may live fifty years or so—only fancy!—but I would rather Percival had the chance than Sir Charles. That's all. You'll explain it to your father? It can't do any harm if it does no good."

"Oh no: I see. It can't do any harm."

"And now I'll be off," laughed Sissy. "How dreadfully I have made you waste your time! I dare say if I hadn't been here you would have written ever so many things on parchment and tied them up with red tape."

"Oh yes, quantities!" Hardwicke replied as he escorted her to the door. "A cartload at least. I'm glad you think I'm so industrious."

Standing outside, he said something about her horse. He did not like Firefly's look, and he told her so. Moreover, he threatened to tell Mrs. Middleton his bad opinion of Sissy's favorite.

"Nonsense!" she answered lightly. "There's nothing to be afraid of." But suddenly she turned and looked at him. "Don't you really think Firefly is safe?" she said. "Well, I must see about it.—William, I'm not going back now, and I think I'll walk to Mrs. Elliott's. You had better meet me here at half-past two."

And with a parting glance at Hardwicke she went away down the sunshiny street, and he stood looking after her. He would have liked to be her escort to the Elliotts' house, but he had her message to deliver to his father, and he knew she would not permit it. Besides, to tell the truth, she had taken him by surprise, and gone away before he thought of anything of the kind. So he could only stand bareheaded on the office-steps watching her as she went on her way. But suddenly his lips parted to let out a word, which certainly would not have escaped him had he been by Sissy's side. "There's that Fothergill fellow!" said Henry, recognizing the captain's slim figure and black moustache. And he turned on his heel and went in.

He was quite right. It was Fothergill who came sauntering along the pave-

ment, looking at the shop-windows, at the passers-by, at the preparations for the market, with quick eyes and an interest which conveyed the impression of his superiority to it all better than any affectation of languid indifference. His glances seemed to say, "And this is a country town—a market—these are farmers—people live here all their lives!" But when he saw Sissy Langton he came forward eagerly. And perhaps it was just as well that he was at hand to be her squire through the busy little street, for the girl was seized with a new and unaccountable nervousness. A bit of orange-peel lying in the road caused her a sudden tremor. Two or three meek and wondering cows, which gazed vacantly round in search of their familiar pasture, appeared to her as a herd of savage brutes. She looked distrustfully up and down the road, and waited at the pavement's edge for a donkey-cart to pass before she dared attempt a crossing. It was just at this moment that the captain appeared, quickening his pace and lifting his hat, only too ready to guard her through all the perils of a Fordborough market-day.

Henry Hardwicke hated reading, and had no particular love for the law. His father said he was a fool, and was inordinately fond of him nevertheless. It might be that the old lawyer was right on both points. And, dull as Henry was supposed to be, he was capable of delicate feelings and perceptions as far as Sissy Langton was concerned. It seemed to him that accident had revealed to him a hidden wound in her heart; and the revelation pained him—not selfishly, for he had never hoped for himself, but because of the secret suffering which it implied. His one idea was to do her bidding, yet not betray her. He delivered her message to his father with a tact of which he was himself unconscious. On his lips it became no less urgent, but he dwelt especially on Sissy's desire to see justice done to the man who had been accidentally disinherited; on her feeling that she owed more to the Thornes, whose home and love she had shared, than to the Langtons, with whom she

shared nothing but a name; and on her impatience of even an hour's delay, because the squire's sudden death had made a deep impression on her mind. All this, translated into Harry's blunt and simple speech, was intelligible enough to Mr. Hardwicke. The girlish whim that all should be done on her birthday made him smile, but the remembrance of Godfrey Thorne was present in his mind as in hers. He did not attach much importance to the whole affair, and felt that he should not be overwhelmed with surprise should he hear a few months later that Sissy was going to be married to some one else, and wanted to make some compromise—perhaps to resign the squire's legacy to Percival. To his eyes it looked more like an attempt at restitution than anything else. "She is sorry for him, poor fellow!" thought Mr. Hardwicke. "She did not know her own mind, and now she would like to atone to him somehow."

Sissy came back alone at the time she had fixed, looking white and anxious. A client came out as she arrived, and five farmers were waiting in the office to see Mr. Hardwicke: therefore, though she was ushered in at once, the interview was brief. The old lawyer paid her a smiling compliment on her promptitude. "We have to advise people to make their wills sometimes," he said, "but you are beforehand with us." Sissy expressed a fear that she had troubled him on a very busy day, and he assured her that to blame her because her twenty-first birthday happened to fall on a Friday would be the last thing he should think of doing. Then the girl looked up at him, and said that old Mr. Thorne had al-

ways been so good to her, and she thought that perhaps if he could see he would be glad, so she could not put it off. She stopped abruptly, and her eyes filled. Mr. Hardwicke bent his head in silent acquiescence, the brief document was duly signed and witnessed, and Sissy went away, riding home as if she had never known what fear meant. Suppose Firefly threw her, what then? She had been to Mr. Hardwicke, and though her "Cecilia Jane Langton" was not all she could have wished, because she was nervous and Mr. Hardwicke's pen was so scratchy, still there it was. And was not the paper, thus signed, a talisman against all dread of death?

So her burden was lighter. But what could lighten the other load which lay on her heart? She hardly knew whether it were love or fear that she felt for Percival. The long days which had passed since she saw him had only deepened the impression of that summer evening when they parted. His reply to her entreaty that he would come back to her had been exactly what she had feared—as gentle as he himself had been when they stood face to face in the old drawing-room at Brackenhill, and as inflexible. If she could forget him—if she could learn to care for Captain Fothergill or Walter Latimer—what a bright, easy, sunshiny life might yet be hers! No, ten thousand times, no! Better to suffer the weariness of dread and doubt and longing for Percival.

But Percival would have been astonished if he could have seen the darkly heroic guise in which he reigned over Sissy Langton's dreams.



CHAPTER XLII.
WALKING TO ST. SYLVESTER'S.



BERTIE LISLE was sorely driven and perplexed for a few days after his triumphant performance on the organ. His letter was not a failure, but further persuasion was required to make his success complete; and during the brief interval he was persecuted by Gordon's brother.

Mr. William Gordon, when amiable and flattering, had an air of rough and hearty friendliness which was very well as long as you held him in check. But when, though still amiable, he thought he might begin to take liberties, it was not so well. He was hard, coarse-tongued and humorous. And when Mr. William Gordon had the upper hand he showed himself in his true colors, as a bully and a blackguard. Bertie Lisle, not yet two-and-twenty, was no match for this man of thirty-five. He owed him money—no great sum, but more than he could pay. Now that matters had come to this pass, Lisle was heartily ashamed of himself, his debts and his associates; but the

more shame he felt the more anxious he was that nothing should be known. He had sought the society of these men because he had wearied of the restraints of his home-life. Judith checked and controlled him unconsciously through her very guilelessness. He might have had his liberty in a moment had he chosen, but the assertion of his right would have involved explanations and questions, and Bertie hated scenes. He found it easier to coax Lydia than to face Judith.

But this state of affairs could not go on. Bertie had once fancied that he saw a possible way out of his difficulties, and had hinted to Gordon, with an air of mystery, that though he could not pay at once he thought he might soon be in a position to pay all. If he hoped to silence his creditors for a while with this vague promise, he was mistaken. Gordon continually reminded him of it. He had not cared to inquire into the source of the coming wealth, but if Lisle meant to rob somebody's till or forge Mr. Clifton's name to a cheque, no doubt Gordon thought he might as well do it and get it over. If you are going to take a plunge, what, in the name of common sense, is the good of standing shivering on the brink?

Unluckily, Lisle's idea presented difficulties on closer inspection. But as he had gone so far that it was his only hope, he made up his mind to risk all. He saw but one possible way of carrying out his scheme. It was exactly the way which no cautious man would ever have dreamed of taking, and therefore it suited the daring inexperience of the boy. Therefore, also, it was precisely what no one would dream of guarding against. In fact, Bertie was driven by stress of circumstances into a stroke of genius. He took his leap, and entered on a period of suspense, anxiety and sustained excitement which had a wild exhilaration and sense of recklessness in it. He

suffered much from a strong desire to burst into fits of unseasonable laughter. His nerves were so tensely strung that it might have been expected he would be irritable; and so he was sometimes, but never with Judith.

Thorne listened night after night for the man with the latch-key, but he listened in vain. He was only partly reassured, for he feared that matters were not going on well at St. Sylvester's. Indeed, he knew they were not, for Bertie had strolled into his room one day with a face like a thundercloud. The young fellow was out of temper, and perhaps a little off his guard in consequence. When Gordon amused himself by baiting him, Lisle was forced to keep silence; but in this case it was possible, if not quite prudent, to allow himself the relief of speech.

"What is the matter?" said Percival, looking up from his book.

Bertie, who had turned his back on him, stood looking out of the window and tapping a tune on the pane. "What's the matter?" he repeated. "Clifton has taken it into his stupid head to lecture me about some rubbish he has heard somewhere. Why doesn't some one lock him up in an idiot asylum? The meddling fool!"

"If that is qualification enough—" Thorne began mildly, but Bertie raged on:

"What business is it of his? I'm not going to stand his impudence, as I'll precious soon let him know. A likely story! He didn't buy me body and soul for his paltry salary, though he seems to think it. The old humbug in a cassock! It's a great deal of preaching and very little practice with him, *I* know."

(He knew nothing of the kind. Mr. Clifton was a well-meaning man, who had never disturbed his mind by analyzing his own opinions nor any one else's, and who worked conscientiously in his parish. But no doubt Bertie had too much respect for truth to let it be mixed up with a fit of ill-temper.)

"Take care what you are about," said Percival as he turned a leaf. He looked absently at the next page. "I don't want to interfere with you—"

"Oh, *you*! that's different," said Lisle without looking round. "Not that I should recommend even you—"

"Don't finish: I hope the caution isn't needed. Of course you will do as you think best. You are your own master, but I know you'll not forget that it is a question of your sister's bread as well as your own. That's all. If you can do better for her—"

Bertie half smiled, but still he looked out of the window, and he did not speak. Presently the fretful tapping on the pane ceased, and he began to whistle the same tune very pleasantly. At last, after some time, the tune stopped altogether. "I believe I'm a fool," said Lisle. "After all, what harm can Clifton do to me? And, as you say, it would be a pity to make Judith uneasy. Bless the stupid prig! he shall lecture me again to-morrow if he likes. He hasn't broken any bones this time, and I dare say he won't the next." The young fellow came lounging across the room with his hands in his pockets as he spoke. "I suppose he has gone on preaching till it's his second nature. Talk of the girl in the fairy-tale dropping toads and things from her lips! Why, she was a trifle to old Clifton. I do think he can't open his mouth without letting a sermon run out."

Thorne was relieved at the turn Bertie's meditations had taken, but he could not think that the young fellow's position at St. Sylvester's was very secure. Neither did Judith. Neither did Bertie himself. The thought did not trouble him, but Judith was evidently anxious.

"You do too much," said Percival one day to her. They were walking to St. Sylvester's, and Bertie had run back for some music which had been forgotten.

"Perhaps," said Judith simply. "But it can't be helped."

"What! are they all so busy at Standon Square?"

"Well, the holidays, being so near, make more work, and give one the strength to get through it."

"I'm not so sure of that. I'm afraid Miss Crawford leaves too much to you, and you will break down."

"I'm more afraid Miss Crawford will

break down. Poor old lady! it goes to my heart to see her. She tries so hard not to see that she is past work; and she is."

"Is she so old? I didn't know—"

"She was a governess till she was quite middle-aged, and then she had contrived to scrape together enough to open this school. My mother was her first pupil, and the best and dearest of all, she says. She had a terribly up-hill time to begin with, and even now it is no very great success. Though she might do very well, poor thing! if they would only let her alone."

"And who will not let her alone?"

"Oh, there is a swarm of hungry relations, who quarrel over every half-penny she makes; and she is so good! But you can understand why she is anxious not to think that her harvest-time is over."

"Poor old lady!" said Percival. "And her strength is failing?"

Judith nodded: "She does her best, but it makes my heart ache to see her. She comes down in the morning trying to look so bright and young in a smart cap and ribbons: I feel as if I could cry when I see that cap, and her poor shaky hands going up to it to put it straight." There were tears in the girl's voice as she spoke. "And her writing! It is always the bad paper or the bad pen, or the day is darker than any day ever was before."

"Does she believe all that?" the young man asked.

"I hardly know. I think she never has opened her eyes to the truth, but I suspect she feels that she is keeping them shut. It is just that trying not to see which is so pathetic, somehow. I find all manner of little excuses for doing the writing, or whatever it may happen to be, instead of her, and then I see her looking at me as if she half doubted me."

"Does the school fall off at all?"

"I'm not sure. Schools fluctuate, you know, and it seems they had scarlet fever about six months ago. That might account for a slight decrease in the numbers: don't you think so?"

"Oh, certainly," said Percival, with as

much confidence as if boarding-school statistics had been the one study of his life. "No doubt of it."

They walked a few paces in silence, and then Judith said, "Perhaps she will be better after the holidays. I think she is very tired, she is so terribly drowsy. She drops asleep directly she sits down, and is quite sure she has been awake all the time. I'm so afraid the girls may take advantage of it some day."

"But even for Miss Crawford's sake you must not do too much," urged Percival.

"I will try not. But it is such a comfort to me to be able to help her! If it were not for that, I sometimes question whether I did wisely in coming here at all."

"If it is not an impertinent question—though I rather think it is—what should you have done if you had not come?"

"I should have stayed with an aunt of mine. She wanted me, but she would not help Bertie, and I fancied that I could be of use to him. But I doubt if I can do him much good, and if I lost my situation I should only be a burden to him."

"Perhaps that might do him more good than anything," Percival suggested. "He might rise to the occasion and take life in earnest, which is just what he wants, isn't it? For any one can see how fond he is of you."

"He's a dear boy," Judith answered with a smile, and looked over her shoulder. The dear boy was not in sight.

"Plenty of time," said Percival. "But it is rather a long way for him, so often as he has to go to St. Sylvester's."

"He doesn't mind that. He says he can do it in less than ten minutes, only to-day he had to go back, you see."

"It isn't so far as it would be to St. Andrew's," Thorne went on. "By the way, have you ever been to your parish church?"

"Never. I don't think your description was very inviting."

"Oh, but it would be worth while to go once. The first time I went I thought it was like a quaint, melancholy dream. Such a dim, hollow, dusty old building,

and little cherubs with grimy little marble faces looking down from the walls. When the congregation began to shuffle in each new-comer was more decrepit and withered than the last, till I looked to see if they could really be coming through the doorway from the outer world, or whether the vaults were open and they were the ghosts of some dead-and-gone congregation of long ago. And when I looked round again, there was the clergyman in a dingy surplice, as if he had risen like a spectre in his place. He stared at us all with his dull old eyes, and turned the leaves of a great book. And all at once he began to read, in a piping voice so thin and weak that it sounded just like the echo of some former service—as if it had been lost in the dusty corners, and was coming back in a broken, fragmentary way. It was all the more like an echo because the old clerk is very deaf, and he begins in a haphazard fashion when he thinks it is time for the other to have done. So sometimes there is a long pause, and then you have their two old voices mixed up together, like an echo when it grows confused. It is very strange—gives one all manner of quaint fancies. You should go once. Nothing could be more utterly unlike St. Sylvester's."

"I think I will go," said Judith. "I know a church something like that, only not quite so dead. There is a queer old clerk there too."

"Where is that?"

"Oh, it isn't anywhere near here. A little old-fashioned country town—Rookleigh."

Percival turned eagerly: "Where did you say? *Rookleigh*?"

"Yes. Why, do you know anything of it?"

"Tell me what you know of it."

"My aunt, Miss Lisle, lives there—the aunt I was telling you about, who wanted me to stay with her."

"And you were there last summer?"

"Yes. In fact, I was there on a visit when I heard that—that our home was broken up. I stayed on for some time: I had nowhere to go."

"Miss Lisle lives in a red house by the

river-side," said Percival, prompted by a sudden impulse.

It was Judith's turn to look surprised: "Yes, she does. But, Mr. Thorne, how do you know?"

"The garden slopes to the water's edge," he went on, not heeding her. "And there is a wide gravel-path down the middle, cutting it exactly in two. It is all very neat—it is wonderfully neat—and Miss Lisle comes down the path, looking right and left to see whether all the carnations and the chrysanthemum-plants are tied up properly, and whether there are any snails."

"Mr. Thorne, who told you—? No, you must have seen."

"But you didn't walk with her. There was a cross-path behind some evergreens."

"Yes," said Judith: "I hated to be seen then. I couldn't go beyond the garden, and I used to walk backward and forward there, so many times to a mile—I forget how many now. But, Mr. Thorne, tell me, how do you know all this?"

"It is simple enough," he said. "I was at Rookleigh one day, and I strolled along the path by the river. You can see the house from the farther side. I stood and looked at it."

"Yes, but how did you know whose house it was?"

"I hadn't the least idea. But it took my fancy—why I don't know. And while I was looking I saw that some one came and went behind the evergreens."

"Then it was only a guess when you began to describe it?"

"Well, I suppose so. It must have been, mustn't it?" he said, looking curiously at her. "But it felt like a certainty."

They were just at St. Sylvester's, and Bertie ran up panting, waving his music. "Lucky I've not got to sing," said the young fellow in a jerky voice, and rushed to the vestry-door, where Mr. Clifton fidgeted, watch in hand. After such a race it was natural enough that the young organist should be somewhat flushed as he went up the aisle with a surpliced boy at his heels. But Judith

had not hurried—had rather lingered, looking back. What was the meaning of that soft rosy glow upon her cheeks? And why was Thorne so absent, standing up and sitting down mechanically, till the service was half over before he knew it?

He was recalling that day at Rookleigh—the red houses by the water-side, the poplars, the pigeons, the old church, the sleepy streets, the hot blue sky, the gray glitter of the river through the boughs, and the girl half seen behind the evergreens. She had been to him like a fair faint figure in a dream, and the airy fancies that clustered round her had been more dreamy yet. But suddenly the dream-girl had stepped out of the clouds into every-day life, and stood in flesh and blood beside him. And the nameless fascination with which his imagination had played was revealed as the selfsame attraction as that which his soul had known when, years before, he first met Judith Lisle.

CHAPTER XLIII.

FAINT HEART WINS FAIR LADY.

PERCIVAL THORNE would have readily declared that it was a matter of utter indifference to him whether his landlady went at the end of March to pay a three weeks' visit to her eldest sister or whether she stayed at home. He took very little notice when Mrs. Bryant told him of her intention. She talked for some time. When she was gone Thorne found himself left with the impression that the lady in question was a Mrs. Smith, who resided somewhere in Bethnal Green; that some one was a plumber and glazier; that some one had had the measles; that trade was not all one could wish, nor were Mrs. Bryant's relations quite what they should have been, but that, she thanked Goodness, they were not all alike. This struck him as a reasonable cause for thankfulness, as otherwise there would certainly have been a terrible monotony in the family circle. He also had an idea that Mrs. Smith had received a great deal of good advice on the subject of her mar-

riage, and he rather thought that Smith was not the sort of man to make a woman happy. "Either Smith isn't, or Bryant wasn't when he was alive—now which was it?" smiled Percival to himself, ruffling his wavy hair and leaning back in his chair with a confused sense of relief. And then the dispute about the grandmother's crockery came in, and the uncle who had a bit of money and married the widow at Margate. "I hope to Goodness Mrs. Bryant will stay away some time if she has half as much to say on her return!"

The good woman had not gone into Mr. Thorne's room for the purpose of giving him all this information. It had come naturally to her lips when she found herself there, but she merely wished to suggest to him that Lydia would be busy while she was away, and money-matters were terribly muddling, weren't they? and perhaps it would make it easier if Mr. Thorne's bill stood over. Percival understood in a moment. The careworn face, the confused manner, told him all. Lydia would probably waste the money, and the old lady, though with perceptible hesitation, had decided to trust him rather than her daughter. It was so. Lydia considered that her mother was stingy, and that finery was indispensable while she was husband-hunting.

"You see, there'll be one less to feed, and it would only bother her; and you've always been so regular with your money," said Mrs. Bryant wistfully.

"Oh, I see, perfectly," Thorne replied. "I won't trouble Miss Bryant about it. It shall be all ready for you when you come back, of course. A pleasant journey to you!"

The old lady went off, not without anxiety, but very favorably impressed with Percival's lofty manner. And he thought no more about it. But the time came when he wished that Mrs. Bryant had never thought of visiting Mrs. Smith of Bethnal Green at all.

Easter fell very late that year, far on in April, and it seemed to Judith that the holidays would never come. At last, however, they were within a week of the breaking-up day. It was Sunday, and

she could say to herself, "Next Thursday I shall be free."

Bertie and she had just breakfasted, and he was leaning in his favorite attitude against the chimney-piece. She had taxed him with looking ill, but he had smilingly declared that there was nothing amiss with him.

"Do you sleep well, Bertie?" she asked wistfully.

"Pretty well. Not very much last night, by the way. But you are whiter than I am: look at yourself in the glass. Even if you deduct the green—"

Judith gazed into the verdant depths. "I don't know how much to allow," she said thoughtfully. "By the way, Bertie, I'm not going with you to St. Sylvester's this morning."

"All right!" said Bertie.

"I have a fancy to go to St. Andrew's for once," said Judith, arranging the ribbon at her throat as she spoke—"just for a change. You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind? no," said Bertie, but something in his voice caused her to look round. He was as pale as death, grasping the chimney-piece with one hand while the other was pressed upon his heart.

"Bertie! You *are* ill! Lean on me." The little sofa was close by, and she helped him to it and ran for eau de cologne. When she came back he was lying with his head thrown back, white and still, yet looking more like himself than in that first ghastly moment. Presently the blood came back to cheek and lip, and he looked up and smiled. "You are better?" she said anxiously.

"Oh yes, I'm better. I'm all right. Can't think what made me make such a fool of myself."

"No, don't get up: lie still a little longer," said Judith, standing over him with the wicker flask in her hand. "Oh, how you frightened me!"

"Don't pour any more of that stuff over me," he answered languidly. "You must have expended quarts. I can feel little rivulets of it creep-creeping at the roots of my hair."

"But, Bertie, what was the matter with you?"

"I hardly know. It's all over now. My heart seemed to stop beating just for a moment. I wonder if it did, really? Or should I have died? Do sit down, Judith. You look as if you were going to faint too."

She sat down by him. After a minute Bertie's slim, long fingers groped restlessly, and she held them in a tender grasp. So for some time they remained hand in hand. Judith watched him furtively as he lay with closed eyes, his fair boyish face pressed on the dingy cushion, and a great tenderness lighted her quiet glance. Suddenly, Bertie's eyes opened and met hers. She answered his look of inquiry: "You are all I have, dear. We two are alone, are we not? I must be anxious if you are ill."

He pressed her hand, but he turned his face a little away, conscious at the same moment of a flush of self-reproach and of a lurking smile. "Don't!" he said. "I'm not ill. I'm all right now—never better. Isn't it time for me to be off? I say, my dear girl, if you don't look sharp you'll be late at St. Andrew's."

"St. Andrew's!" she repeated scornfully. "I go to St. Andrew's *now*, and think all the service through that my bad boy may be fainting at St. Sylvester's! No, no: I shall go with you."

"Thank you," said Bertie, sitting up and running his fingers through his hair by way of preparation for church. "I shall be glad, if you don't mind."

"That is," she went on, "if you are fit to go at all."

"Oh yes. I couldn't leave old Clifton in the lurch for anything short of sudden death, and even then he'd feel himself ill used. Stay at home because I felt faint? It would be as much as my place is worth," said Bertie with a smile of which Judith could not understand the fine irony.

"I'll go and get ready," she said. But she went to the door of Percival's sitting-room and knocked.

"Come in," he answered, and she opened it. He was stooping over his fire, poker in hand. She paused on the threshold, and, after breaking a hard lump of coal, he looked over his shoul-

der: "Miss Lisle! I beg your pardon. I thought they had come for the breakfast things."

"Oh!" she said, in a slightly disappointed tone. "You are not going to church to-day." For Thorne was more picturesquely careless in his apparel than is the wont of the British church-goer.

A rapid change of mind enabled him to answer truthfully, "Yes, I am. I ought to get ready, I suppose. Did you want me for anything, Miss Lisle?"

"Were you going to St. Sylvester's, or not?"

Percival had known by her tone that she wanted him to go to church. But he did not know which church claimed his attendance, so he answered cautiously, "Oh, I hardly know. I think I should like some one to make up my mind for me. Are you going with your brother?"

"Yes," said Judith. "He isn't very well to-day. I was rather frightened by his fainting just now."

"Of course I'll go with you," said Percival. "I'll be ready in two minutes. Been fainting? Is he better now?"

"Much better. Will you really?" And Judith vanished.

Percival was perhaps a little longer than the time he had named, but he soon came out in a very different character from that of the young man who had lounged over his late breakfast in his shabby coat. He looked anxiously at young Lisle as they started, but Bertie's appearance was hardly such as to call for immediate alarm. He seemed well enough, Percival thought, though perhaps a little excited. In truth, there was not much amiss with him. He had got over the uneasy sense of self-reproach: the sudden shock which had caused his dismay was past, and as he went his way, solemnly escorted by his loving sister and his devoted friend, he was suffering much more from suppressed laughter than from anything else. Everything was a joke, and the narrowness of his escape that morning was a greater joke than all. "By Jove! what a laugh we will have over it one of these days!" thought Lisle as he put on his surplice.

Loving eyes followed him as he went to his place, and his name was fondly breathed in loving prayers.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE LAST MUSIC-LESSON.

ON the Tuesday morning Bertie was late for breakfast, and came in yawning rather ostentatiously. Judith protested good-humoredly: "Lie in bed late *or* yawn, but you can't want to do both. Why, it is eleven hours since you went up to bed!" This was perfectly true, but not so much to the point as she supposed.

Ever since the mysterious fainting-fit Judith had watched him with tender anxiety, and it seemed to her that there was something strange in his manner that morning. She did not know what it was, but had she held any clew to his thoughts she would have perceived that Bertie was astonished and bewildered. He looked as if a dream had suddenly become a reality, as if a jest had turned into marvellous earnest. He smoked his pipe, leaning by the open window, with a serious and almost awestruck expression in his eyes. One might have fancied that he was transformed visibly to himself, and was perplexed to find that the change was invisible to others. Judith could not understand this quiet gravity.

She came up to him and laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder. He did not turn, but pointed with the stem of his pipe across the street. "Look!" he said. "There's a bit of houseleek on those tiles. I never saw it till to-day."

"Nor I."

"It looks green and pleasant," said Bertie in a gentle, meditative voice. "I like it."

"Our summer garden," Judith suggested.

"I wonder if there's any houseleek on our roof?" he went on after a moment.

"We will hope so, for our neighbors' sake," said his sister. "It's a new idea to me. I thought our roof was nothing but tiles and cats—principally cats."

Bertie smoked his pipe, and surveyed

the houseleek as if it were a newly-discovered star. Everything was strange and wonderful that morning. Vague ideas floated in the atmosphere, half seen against the background of common things. The mood, born of exceptional circumstances, was unique in his life. Had it been habitual, there would have been hope of a new poet, or, since his taste lay in the direction of wordless harmony, of a great musician.

"You won't be late at the square, Bertie dear?" said Judith.

"No, I'll not be late," he answered absently. He felt that the pale gold of the April sunlight was beautiful even in Bellevue street.

"The last lesson," she said. Bertie, suddenly roused, looked round at her with startled eyes. "What! had you forgotten that the girls go home to-morrow?" cried Judith in great surprise. She had counted the days so often.

He laughed shortly and uneasily: "I suppose I had. Queer, wasn't it? Yes, it's my last lesson, as you say. If I had only thought of it, I might have composed a Lament, taught it to all my pupils, and charged a fancy price for it in the bill."

"That would have been very touching. A little tiresome to you perhaps, and to Miss Crawford—"

"Bless you! she's always asleep," said Bertie, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and pocketing it. "I might teach them the Old Hundredth, one after the other, all the morning through: she wouldn't know. So your work ends to-morrow?"

"Not quite. The girls go to-morrow, but I have promised to be at the square on Thursday. There's a good deal to be done, and I should like to see Miss Crawford safely off in the afternoon."

"Where's the old woman going?"

"To Cromer for a few days. She lived there as a child, and loves it more than any place in the world."

"Does the poor old lady think she'll grow young again there?" said Bertie. "Well, perhaps she will," he added after a pause. "At any rate, she may forget that she has grown old."

Punctually at the appointed hour the young music-master arrived in Standon Square. It was for the last time, as Judith had said. Miss Crawford looked older, and Miss Crawford's cap looked newer, than either had ever done before. She put her weak little hand into Bertie's, and said some prim, kindly words about the satisfaction his lessons had given, the progress his pupils had made and the confidence she felt in his sister and himself. As she spoke she was sure he was gratified, for the color mounted to his face. Suddenly she stopped in the midst of her neatly-worded sentences. "You are like your mother, Mr. Lisle," she said: "I never saw it so much before." And she murmured something, half to herself, about her first pupil, the dearest of them all. Bertie, for once in his life, was silent and bashful.

The old lady rang the bell, and requested that Miss Macdonald might be told that it was time for her lesson and that Mr. Lisle had arrived. During the brief interval that ensued the music-master looked furtively round the room, as if he had never seen it before. It seemed to him almost as if he looked at it with different eyes, and read Miss Crawford's life in it. It was a prim, light-colored drawing-room, adorned with many trifles which were interesting as indications of patience and curious in point of taste. There was a great deal of worsted work, and still more of crochet. Everything that could possibly stand on a mat stood on a mat, and other mats lay disconsolately about, waiting as cabmen wait for a fare. Every piece of furniture was carefully arranged with a view to supporting the greatest possible number of anti-macassars. There were water-color paintings on the walls, and bouquets of wax flowers bloomed gayly under glass shades on every table. There were screens, cushions, pen-wipers. Bertie calculated that Miss Crawford's drawing-room might yield several quarts of beads. He had seen all these things many times, but they had acquired a new meaning and interest that day.

Miss Macdonald appeared, and Miss Crawford seated herself on a pink rose,

about the size of a Jersey cabbage, with two colossal buds, and rested her tired back against a similar group. At the first notes of the piano her watchful and smiling face relaxed and she nodded wearily in the background. It did not matter much. The young master was grave, silent, patient, conscientious. In fact, it did not matter at all. Having slept through the earlier lessons, the schoolmistress might well sleep through this. It was rather a pity that, instead of taking a placid and unbroken rest on the sofa, she sat stiffly on a worked chair and started into uneasy wakefulness between the lessons, dismissing one girl and sending for the next with infinite politeness and propriety. At last she said, "And will you have the kindness to tell Miss Nash?"

Bertie sat turning over a piece of music till the sound of the opening door told him that his pupil had arrived. Then he rose and looked in her direction, but avoided her eyes.

There was no school-girl slovenliness about Emmeline Nash. Her gray dress was fresh and neat, a tiny bunch of spring flowers was fastened in it, a ribbon of delicate blue was round her neck. As she came forward with a slight flush on her cheek, her head carried defiantly and the sunlight shining on her pale hair, Miss Crawford said to herself that really she was a stylish girl, ladylike and pretty. Her schoolfellows declared that Emmeline always went about with her mouth hanging open. But that day the parted lips had an innocent expression of wonder and expectation.

The lesson was begun in as business-like a fashion as the others. Perhaps Emmeline regaled the young master with a few more false notes than usual, but she was curiously intent on the page before her. Presently she stole a glance over her shoulder at Miss Crawford. She was asleep. Emmeline played a few bars mechanically, and then she turned to Bertie.

The eyes which met her own had an anxious, tender, almost reverential, expression. This slim fair girl had suddenly become a very wonderful being

to Lisle, and he touched her hand with delicate respect and looked strangely at her pretty vacant face.

Had there been the usual laughter lurking in his glance, Emmeline would have giggled. Her nerves were tensely strung, and giggling was her sole expression for a wide range of emotion. But his gravity astonished her so much that she looked at the page before her again, and went on playing with her mouth open.

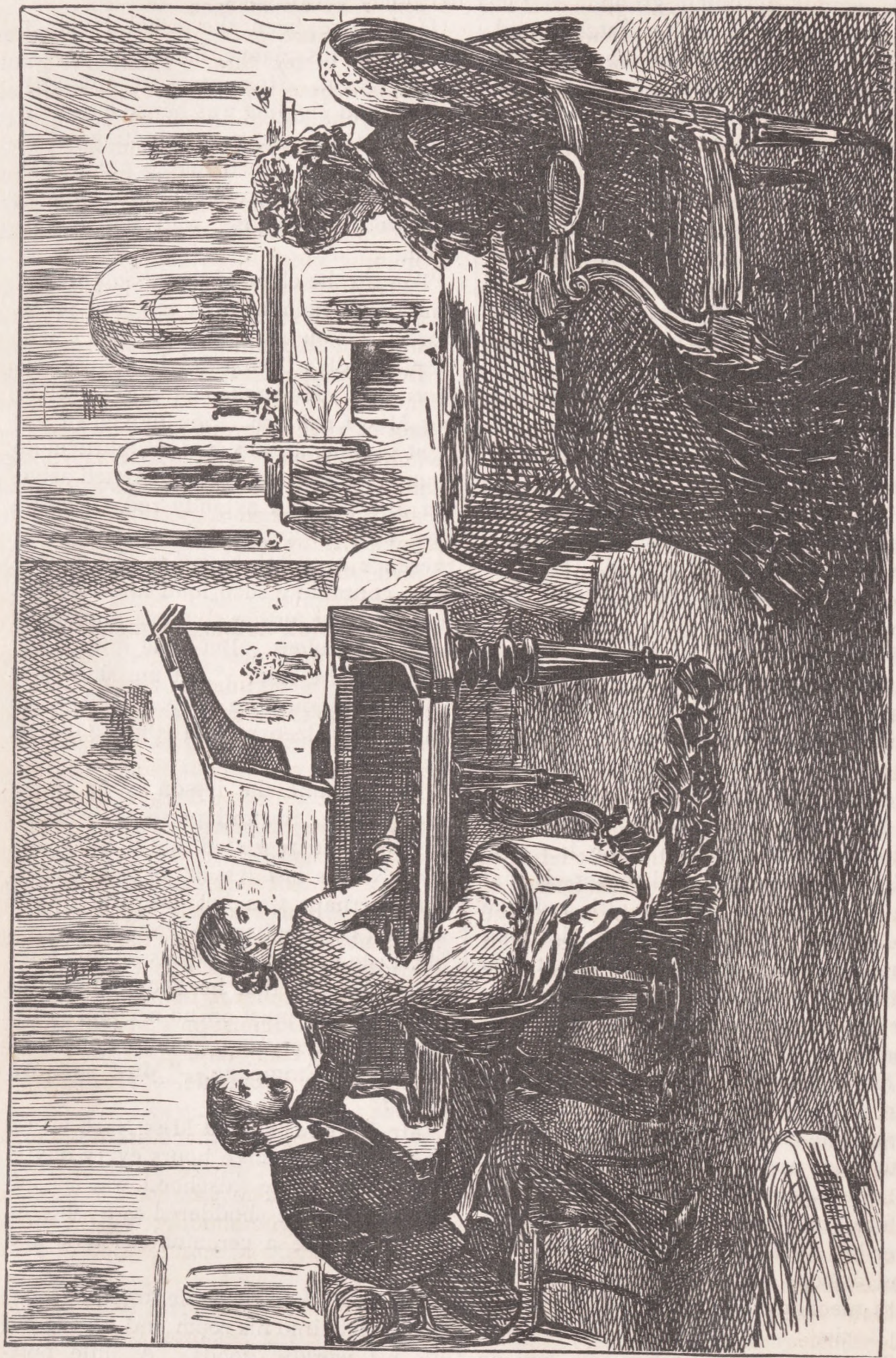
Toward the close of the lesson master and pupil exchanged a few whispered words. "You may rely on me," said Bertie finally: "what did I promise this morning?" He spoke cautiously, watching Miss Crawford. She moved in her light slumber and uttered an inarticulate sound. The young people started asunder and blushed a guilty red. Emmeline, with an unfounded assumption of presence of mind, began to play a variation containing such loud and agitated discords that further slumber must have been miraculous. But Lisle interposed. "Gently," he said. "Let me show you how that should be played." And he lulled the sleeper with the tenderest harmony.

In due time the lesson came to an end. Miss Crawford presided over the farewell, and regretted that it was really Miss Nash's last lesson, as (though Mr. Lisle perhaps was not aware of it) she was not coming back to Standon Square. Mr. Lisle in his turn expressed much regret, and said that he should miss his pupil. "You must on no account forget to practise every day," said the old lady, turning to Emmeline.—"Must she, Mr. Lisle?"

Mr. Lisle hoped that Miss Nash would devote at least three hours every day to her music. The falsehood was so audacious that he shuddered as he uttered it. He made a ceremonious bow and fled.

Going back to Bellevue street, he locked himself into his room and turned out all his worldly goods. A little portmanteau was carefully packed with a selection from them, and hidden away in a cupboard, and the rest were laid by as

nearly as possible in their accustomed order. Then he took out his purse and examined its contents with dissatisfied eyes. "Can't get on without the sinews



"SHE WAS ASLEEP."—Page 221.

of war," Bertie soliloquized. "I might manage with double as much perhaps, but how shall I get it? Spoiling the

Egyptians would be the scriptural course of conduct I suppose, and I'm ready; but where are the Egyptians? I won-

der if Judith keeps a hoard anywhere? Or Lydia? Shall I go and ask her to lend me jewels of silver and jewels of gold? Poor Lydia! I fear I could hardly find a plausible excuse for borrowing the blue earrings. And I doubt they wouldn't help me much. No, I must find some better plan than that."

He was intensely excited: his flushed cheek and glittering eyes betrayed it. But the feelings of the morning had worn off in the practical work of packing and preparing for his flight. Perhaps it was as well they had, for they could hardly have survived an interview with Lydia in the afternoon. She was suspicious, and required coaxing to begin with.

"Why, what's the matter, Lydia?" said Lisle at last in his gentlest voice. "You might do this for me."

"You are always wanting something done for you."

"Oh, Lydia! and I've been such a good boy lately!"

"Too good by half," said Lydia.

"And a month ago I was always too bad. How am I to hit your precise taste in wickedness?"

"Oh, I ain't particular to a shade," said Lydia, "as you might know by my helping you to deceive ma and your sister. But as to your goodness, I don't believe in it: so there! Don't tell me! People don't give up all at once, and go to bed at ten o'clock every night, and turn as good as all that. It's my belief you mean to bolt. What have you been doing?"

"Look here, Lydia, I've told you once, and I tell you again: I want a holiday, and I'm off for two or three days by myself—can't be tied to my sister's apron-string all my life. But I would rather not have any fuss about it, so I shall just go quietly, and send her a line when I've started. I want you to get that portmanteau off, so that I may pick it up at the station to-morrow morning. I *did* think I might count on *you*," said Bertie with heartrending pathos: delicately-shaded acting would have been wasted on Miss Bryant. "You've always been as true as steel. But it seems I was mistaken. Well, no matter. If my sister makes a

scene about my going away, it can't be helped. Perhaps I was wrong to keep my little secrets from her and trust them to any one else."

"I don't say that," Lydia replied. "P'raps others may do as well or better by you."

"Thank you all the same for your former kindness," Bertie continued in a tone of gentle resignation, ignoring her remark. "Since you won't, there is nothing more to be said."

"What do you want to fly off in that fashion for?" said Lydia. "I'll see about your portmanteau if this is all true—"

Bertie assumed an insulted-gentleman air: it was extremely lofty: "Oh, if you doubt me, Miss Bryant—"

"Gracious me! You *are* touchy!" exclaimed poor Lydia in perplexity and distress. "Only one word: you haven't been doing anything bad?"

"On my honor—no," said Bertie haughtily.

"And there's nothing wrong about the portmanteau?"

"Oh, this is too much!" Lisle exclaimed. "I can't be cross-questioned in this fashion—even by *you*." The careless parenthesis was not without effect. "Wrong about it—no! But we'll leave the subject altogether, if you please. I won't trouble you any further."

It was evident to Lydia that he was offended. There was an angry light in his eyes and his cheeks were flushed. "You *are* unkind," she said. "I'll see about it for you; and you knew I would." She saw Bertie's handsome face dimly through a mist of gathering tears.

"Crying?" said Lisle. "Not for me, Lydia? I'm not worth it."

"That I'll be bound you are not," said the girl.

"Then why do you do it?"

"Perhaps you think we always measure our tears, and mind we don't give over-weight," said Lydia scornfully. "Shouldn't cry much at that rate, I expect. I do it because I'm a fool, if you particularly want to know."

Lisle was wondering what style of answer would be suitable and harmless when Mr. Fordham came up the stairs.

Lydia saw him, exclaimed, "Oh my good gracious!" and vanished, while Bertie strolled into his room, invoking blessings on the old man's head.

That evening there was a choir-practice at St. Sylvester's. Mr. Clifton was peculiarly tiresome, and the young organist replied with an air of easy scorn, the more irritating that it was so good-humored. Had the worthy incumbent been a shade less musical there would have been a quarrel then and there. But how could he part with a man who played so splendidly? Bertie received his instructions as to their next meeting with an unmoved face. "It is so important now that Easter is so near," said the clergyman. "Thursday evening, and you won't be late?"

"Au revoir, then," said Lisle airily, "since we are to meet so soon." And with a pleasant smile he went his way.

When he got back he found Judith at home, looking worn and white. He was tenderly reproachful. "I'm sure you want your tea," he said. "You should not have thought about me." He waited on her, he busied himself about her in a dozen little ways. He was bright, gay, affectionate. A faint color flushed her face and a smile dawned on her lips. How could she fail to be pleased and touched? How could she do otherwise than smile at this paragon of young brothers? He talked of holiday schemes in a happy though rather random fashion. He sang snatches of songs softly in his pleasant tenor voice.

"Bertie, our mother used to sing that," said Judith after one of them.

"Did she?" He paused. "I don't remember."

"No, you can't," she answered sorrowfully. "I wish you could."

"I've only the faintest and most shadowy recollection—just a dim idea of somebody," he replied. "But in my little childish troubles I always had you. I don't think I wanted any one else."

Judith took his hand in hers, and held it for a moment fondly clasped: "You can't think how much I like to hear you say that."

Lisle blushed, and was thankful for

the dim light. "Do you know," he said hurriedly, "I rather think I may have a chance of giving old Clifton warning before long?"

"Oh, Bertie! Where could you get anything else as good?"

"Not five-and-twenty miles away." Bertie named a place which they had passed on their journey to Brenthill. "Gordon of our choir told me of it this evening. I think I shall run over tomorrow and make inquiries."

"But why would it be so much better?"

"There's a big grammar school and they have a chapel. I should be organist there."

"But do they pay more?" she persisted.

"Hardly as much to the organist perhaps. But I could give lessons in the school, Gordon tells me, and make no end of money so. Oh, it would be a first-rate thing for me."

"And for me?"

"Oh, I hope you won't have to go on slaving for Miss Crawford. You must come and keep house—" Bertie stopped abruptly. He could deceive on a grand scale, but these small fibs, which came unexpectedly, confused him and stuck in his throat.

"Keep house for you? Is that all I am to do? Bertie, how rich do you hope to be?"

"Rich enough to keep you very soon," he answered gravely.

"But does Mr. Gordon think you have a chance of this appointment?"

"Why not?" said Bertie. "I am fit for it." There was no arrogance in his simple statement of the fact.

"I know you are. All the same, I think I won't give up my situation till we see how this new plan turns out. And I don't want to be idle."

"But I don't want you to work," said Bertie. "You are killing yourself, and you know it. Well, this is worth inquiring about at any rate, isn't it?"

"Yes, it certainly is. It sounds very pleasant. But pray don't be rash: don't give up what you have already until you quite see your way."

"No, but I think I do see it. I'll just take the 8.35 train to-morrow and find out how the land lies. I can be back early in the afternoon."

So the matter was settled. As they went off to bed Lisle casually remarked that he had not seen Thorne that day: "Is he out, I wonder?"

Miss Bryant was making her nightly examination of the premises. She overheard the remark as she turned down the gas in the passage, and informed them that when Mr. Thorne came in from the office he complained of a headache, asked for a cup of tea and went early to bed. "Poor fellow!" said Lisle.—"Good-night, Miss Bryant."

Apparently, Percival's headache did not keep him in bed, for a light gleamed dimly in his sitting-room late that Tuesday night.

CHAPTER XLV.

A THUNDERBOLT IN STANDON SQUARE.

IT was just one o'clock on the following Thursday, and Thorne was walking from the office to Bellevue street. He had adopted a quicker and more business-like pace than in old days, and came down the street with long steps, his head high and an abstracted expression on his face. Suddenly he stopped. "Miss Lisle!" he exclaimed. "Good God! What is the matter?"

It was Judith, but so pale, with fear and horror looking so terribly out of her eyes, that she was like a spectre of herself. She stopped short as he had done, and gazed blankly at him.

"Judith, what is it?" he repeated. "For God's sake, speak! What is the matter?"

He saw that she made a great effort to look like her usual self, and that she partly succeeded. "I don't know," she answered. "Please come, Mr. Thorne, but don't say anything to me yet. Not a word, please."

In silence he offered her his arm. She took it, and they went on together. Something in Judith Lisle always appealed with peculiar force to Percival's

loyalty. He piqued himself on not even looking inquiringly at his companion as they walked, but he felt her hand quivering on his arm, and his brain was busy with conjectures. "Bertie has been away the last day or two," he said to himself. "Can she have heard any bad news of him? But why is she so mysterious about it, for she is not the girl to make a needless mystery?" When they reached Bellevue street she quitted his arm, thanked him with a look and went up stairs. Percival followed her.

She opened the door of her sitting-room and looked in. Then she turned to the young man, who stood gravely in the background as if awaiting her orders.

"Will you come in?" she said. But when she thought he was about to speak she made a quick sign with her hand: "Not yet, please."

The cloth was laid, but some books and papers had been pushed to one end of the table. Judith went to them and lifted them carefully, as if she were looking for something. Then she went to the little side-table, then to the chimney-piece, still seeking, while Thorne stood by the window silently waiting.

The search was evidently unavailing, and Judith rang the bell. During the pause which ensued she rested her elbow on the back of Bertie's easy-chair and covered her eyes with her hand. She was shaking from head to foot, but when the door opened she stood up and tried to speak in her usual voice: "Are there any letters by the second post for me, Emma?"

The little maid looked wonderingly at Mr. Thorne and then at Miss Lisle: "No, ma'am: I always bring 'em up."

"I know you do, but I thought they might have been forgotten. Will you ask Miss Bryant if she is quite sure none came for me this morning?"

There was another silence while Emma went on her errand. She came back with Miss Bryant's compliments, and no letters had come for Miss Lisle.

"Thank you," said Judith. "That will do. I will ring when I want dinner brought in."

When they were left alone Percival

stepped forward. "What is it?" he said. "You will tell me now."

She answered with averted eyes: "You know that our school broke up yesterday? Emmeline Nash went away by the nine-o'clock train, but she has never gone home."

"Has never gone home!" Percival repeated. "That is very strange. She must have met with some accident." There was no answer. "It may not be anything serious: surely, you are distressing yourself too much."

Judith looked up into his face with questioning eyes.

"Or perhaps it is some school-girl freak," Thorne went on. "Naturally, Miss Crawford must be very anxious, but don't make up your mind to the worst till you know for certain."

Still that anxious questioning look, as if she would read his very soul. Percival was startled and perplexed, and his eyes made no response. The girl turned away with a faint cry of impatience and despair: "And I am his own sister!"

Percival stood for a moment thunder-struck. Then "Bertie?" he said.

"But you did not think of him till I spoke," she answered passionately. "It was my doing—mine!"

"Where is Bertie?" Thorne asked the question with something of her fear in his eyes.

"I don't know. I had that yesterday morning."

He took a pencilled scrap of paper from her hand. Bertie had written, "I find I cannot be back this afternoon, probably not till to-morrow. Don't expect me till you see me, and don't be anxious about me. All right.—Your H. L."

"How did you get this?" he asked, turning it uneasily in his fingers.

"A boy brought it from the station not half an hour after he went."

Percival was silent. A sudden certainty had sprung up in his mind, and it made any attempt at reassuring her little better than a lie. Yet he felt as if his certainty were altogether unfounded. He could assign no reason for it. The truth was, that Bertie himself was the

reason, and Percival knew him better than he had supposed.

"Mr. Thorne," said Judith, "don't you hate me for what I've said? Surely you must. Miss Crawford doesn't dream that Bertie has anything to do with this. And you didn't, for I watched your eyes: you never would have thought of him but for me. It is I, his own sister, who have hinted it. He has nobody but me, and when his back is turned I accuse him of being so base, so cruel, so mercenary, that—" She stopped and tried to steady her voice. Suddenly she turned and pointed to the door: "And if he came in there now, this minute—oh, Bertie, my Bertie, if you *would*!—if he stood there now, I should have slandered him without a shadow of proof. Oh, it is odious, horrible! The one in all the world who should have clung to him and believed in him, and I have thought this of him! Say it is horrible, unnatural—reproach me—leave me! Oh, my God! you can't."

And in truth Percival stood mute and grave, holding the shred of paper in his hand and making no sign through all the questioning pauses in her words. But her last appeal roused him. "No," he said gently, "I can't reproach you. If you are the first to think this, don't I know that you will be the one to hope and pray when others give up?" He took her hands in his: she suffered him to do what he would. "How should Miss Crawford think of him?" he said. "Pray God we may be mistaken, and if Bertie comes back can we not keep silence for ever?"

"I could not look him in the face."

"Tell me all," said Thorne. "Where did he say he was going? Tell me everything. If you are calm and if we lose no time, we may unravel this mystery and clear Bertie altogether before any harm is done. As you say, there is no shadow of proof. Miss Nash may have gone away alone: school-girls have silly fancies. Or perhaps some accident on the line—"

"No," said Judith.

"No? Are you sure? Sit down and tell me all."

She obeyed to the best of her ability. She told him what Bertie had said about the situation he hoped to obtain, and what little she knew about Emmeline's disappearance.

Percival listened, with a face which grew more anxious with every word.

This is what had actually happened that morning at Standon Square: Judith was busy over Miss Crawford's accounts. She remembered so well the column of figures, and the doubtful hieroglyphic which might be an 8, but was quite as likely to be a 3. While she sat gazing at it and weighing probabilities in her mind the housemaid appeared, with an urgent request that she would go to Miss Crawford at once. Obeying the summons, she found the old lady looking at an unopened letter which lay on the table before her.

"My dear," said the little schoolmistress, "look at this." There was a tone of hurried anxiety in her voice, and she held it out with fingers that trembled a little.

It was directed in a gentleman's hand, neat and old-fashioned: "Miss Emmeline Nash, care of Miss Crawford, Montague House, Standon Square, Brenthill."

Judith glanced eagerly at the envelope. For a moment she had feared that it might be some folly of Bertie's addressed to one of the girls. But this was no writing of his, and she breathed again. "To Emmeline," she said. "From some one who did not know when you broke up. Did you want me to direct it to be forwarded?"

"Forwarded? where? Do you know who wrote that letter?" By this time Miss Crawford's crisp ribbons were quivering like aspen-leaves.

"No: who? Is there anything wrong about this correspondent of Emmeline's? I thought you would forward it to her at home. Dear Miss Crawford, what is the matter?"

"That is Mr. Nash's writing. Oh, Judith, what does it mean? She went away yesterday to his house, and he writes to her here!"

The girl was taken aback for a moment, but her swift common sense came to her aid: "It means that Mr. Nash has

an untrustworthy servant who has carried his master's letter in his pocket, and posted it a day too late rather than own his carelessness. Some directions about Emmeline's journey: open it and see."

"Ah! possibly: I never thought of that," said Miss Crawford, feeling for her glasses. "But," her fears returning in a moment, "I ought to have heard from Emmeline."

"When? She would hardly write the night she got there. You were sure not to hear this morning: you know how she puts things off. The mid-day post will be in directly: perhaps you'll hear then. Open the letter now and set your mind at rest."

The envelope was torn open. "Now, you'll see he wrote it on the 18th—Good Heavens! it's dated yesterday!"

"MY DEAR EMMELINE: Since Miss Crawford wishes you to remain two days longer for this lesson you talk of, I can have no possible objection, but I wish you could have let me know a little sooner. You very thoughtfully say you will not give me the trouble of writing if I grant your request. I suppose it never occurred to you that by the time your letter reached me every arrangement had been made for your arrival—a greater trouble, which might have been avoided if you had written earlier. Neither did you give me much choice in the matter.

"But I will not find fault just when you are coming home. I took you at your word when your letter arrived yesterday, and did not write. But to-day it has occurred to me that after all you might like a line, and that Miss Crawford would be glad to know that you will be met at the end of your journey."

Compliments to the schoolmistress followed, and the signature,

"HENRY NASH."

The two women read this epistle with intense anxiety. But while Miss Crawford was painfully deciphering it, and had only realized the terrible fact that Emmeline was lost, the girl's quicker brain had snatched its meaning at a glance. She saw the cunning scheme

to secure two days of unsuspected liberty. Who had planned this? Who had so cleverly dissuaded Mr. Nash from writing? And what had the brainless, sentimental school-girl done with the time?

"Where is she?" cried Miss Crawford, clinging feebly to Judith. "Oh, has there been some accident?"

"No accident," said Judith. "Do you not see that it was planned beforehand? She never thought of staying till Friday."

"No, never. Oh, my dear, I don't seem able to understand. Don't you think perhaps my head will be clearer in a minute or two? Where can she be?"

The poor old lady looked vaguely about, as if Miss Nash might be playing hide-and-seek behind the furniture. Her face was veined and ghastly. She hardly comprehended the blow which was falling upon her, but she shivered hopelessly, and thought she should understand soon, and looked up at Judith with a mute appeal in her dim eyes.

"Where can she be?" The girl echoed Miss Crawford's words half to herself. "What ought we to do?"

"I can't think why she wrote and told them not to meet her on Wednesday," said the old lady. "So timid as Emmeline always was, and she hated travelling alone! Oh, Judith! Has she run away with some one?"

A cold hand seemed to clutch Judith's heart, and her face was like marble. Bertie! Oh no—no—no! Not her brother! This treachery could not be his work. Yet "Bertie" flashed before her eyes as if the name were written in letters of flame on Mr. Nash's open note, on the wall, the floor, the ceiling. It swam in a fiery haze between Miss Crawford and herself.

She stood with her hands tightly clasped and her lips compressed. It seemed to her that if she relaxed the tension of her muscles for one moment Bertie's name would force its way out in spite of her. And even in that first dismay she was conscious that she had no ground for her belief but an unreasoning instinct and the mere fact that Bertie was away.

"Help me, Judith!" said Miss Craw-

ford pitifully. She trembled as she clung to the girl's shoulder. "I'm not so young as I used to be, you know. I don't feel as if I could stand it. Oh, if only your mamma were here!"

Judith answered with a sob. Miss Crawford's confession of old age went to her heart. So did that pathetic cry, which was half longing for her who had been so many years at rest, and half for Miss Crawford's own stronger and brighter self of bygone days. She put her arm round the schoolmistress and held up the shaking, unsubstantial little figure. "If Bertie has done this, he has killed her," said the girl to herself, even while she declared aloud, "I *will* help you, dear Miss Crawford. I will do all I can. Don't be so unhappy: it may be better than we fear." But the last words, instead of ringing clear and true, as consolation should, died faintly on her lips.

Something was done, however. Miss Crawford was put on the sofa and had a glass of wine, while Judith sent a telegram in her name to Mr. Nash. But the poor old lady could not rest for a moment. She pulled herself up by the help of the back of the couch, and sitting there, with her ghastly face surmounted by a crushed and woebegone cap, she went over the same old questions and doubts and fears again and again. Judith answered her as well as she could, and persuaded her to lie down once more. But in another moment she was up again: "Judith, I want you! Come here—come quite close!"

"Here I am, dear Miss Crawford. What is it?"

The old lady looked fixedly at the kneeling figure before her. "I've nobody but you, my dear," she said. "You are a little like your mamma sometimes."

"Am I?" said Judith. "So much the better. Perhaps it will make you feel as if I could help you."

"You are not like her to-day. Your eyes are so sad and strange." Judith tried to smile. "Your brother, Mr. Herbert, is more like her. I noticed it when he was here last. She had just that bright, happy look."

"I don't remember that," Judith an-

swered. (One recollected the school-girl, and one the wife.)

"And that sweet smile: Mr. Herbert has that too. One could see how good she was. But I didn't mean to talk about that. There is something—I sha'n't be easy till I have told some one."

"Tell me, my dear," said Judith.

The schoolmistress looked anxiously round: "I may be mistaken—I hope I am—but do you know, dear, I doubt I'm not quite so wakeful as I ought to be. You wouldn't notice it, of course, because it is when I am alone or as good as alone. But sometimes—just now and then, you know—when I have been with the girls while they took their lessons from the masters, the time has seemed to go so very fast. I should really have thought they hadn't drawn a line when the drawing-master has said, 'That will do for to-day, young ladies,' and none of them seemed surprised. And once or twice I really haven't been *quite* sure what they have been practising with Mr. Herbert. But music is so very soothing, isn't it?"

Judith held her breath in terror. And yet would it not be better if that horrible thought came to Miss Crawford too? If others attacked him his sister might defend. Nevertheless, she drew a long sigh of relief when the old lady went on, as if confessing a crime of far deeper dye: "And in church—it isn't easy to keep awake sometimes, one has heard the service so often, and the sermons seem so very much alike—suppose some unprincipled young man—"

"Dear Miss Crawford, no one can wonder if you are drowsy now and then. You are always so busy it is only natural."

"But it isn't right. And," with the quick tears gathering in her eyes, "I ought to have owned it before. Only, I have tried so hard to keep awake!"

"I know you have."

Miss Crawford drew one of her hands from Judith's clasp to find her handkerchief, and then laid her head on the girl's shoulder and sobbed. "If it has happened so," she said—"if it has been my carelessness that has done it, I shall never

forgive myself. Never! For I can never say that I didn't suspect myself of being unfit. It will break my heart. I have been so proud to think that I had never failed any one who trusted me. And now a poor motherless girl, who was to be my especial care, who had no one but me to care for her— Oh, Judith, what has become of her?"

There was silence for a minute. How could Judith answer her?

"I can never say I didn't doubt myself; but it was only a doubt. And how could I give up with so many depending on me?"

"Wait till we know something more," Judith pleaded. "Wait till we hear what Mr. Nash says in answer to your message. I am sure you have tried to act for the best."

"I shall never hold up my head again," said Miss Crawford, and laid it feebly down as if she were tired out.

The telegram came. Emmeline had not been heard of, and Mr. Nash would be at Brenthill that afternoon.

Judith searched the little room which the school-girl had occupied, but no indication of her intention to fly was to be found. She dared not question the servants before Mr. Nash's arrival. Secrecy might be important, and there would be an end to all hope of secrecy if once suspicion were aroused.

"There's nothing to do but to wait," she said, coming down to Miss Crawford. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll go home for an hour or so."

"No, no, no! don't go!"

"I must," said Judith. "I shall not be long."

"You will."

"No. An hour and a half—two hours at the utmost."

"Oh, I understand," said Miss Crawford. "You will never come back."

"Never come back? I will promise you, if you like, that I will be here again by half-past two—that is, if I go now."

"Oh, of course I can't keep you: if you will go, you will. But I think it is very cruel of you. You will leave me to face Mr. Nash alone."

"Indeed I will not," the girl replied.

"And, after all, it is not half so bad for you as for me. He can't blame you. It will kill me, I think, but he can't say anything to you. Oh, Judith, I'm only a stupid old woman, but I have meant to be kind to you."

"No one could have been kinder," said Judith. "Miss Crawford, whatever happens, believe me I am grateful."

"Then you will stop—you will stop? He can't say anything to you, my dear."

Judith was cold with terror at the thought of what Mr. Nash might have to say to her. At the same moment she was burning with anxiety to get to Bellevue street and find some letter from Bertie. She freed her hands gently, but firmly. Miss Crawford sank back in mute despair, as if she had received her death-wound.

"Listen to me," said Judith. "I *must* go, but I will come back. I would swear it, only I don't quite know how people swear," she added with a tremulous little laugh. "Dear Miss Crawford, you trusted mamma: as surely as I am her daughter you may trust me. Won't you trust me, dear?"

"I'll try," said the old lady. "But why must you go?"

"I must, really."

"It won't be so bad for you: he can't blame you," Miss Crawford reiterated, drearily pleading. "Judith, no one ever had the heart to be so cruel as you will be if you don't come back."

"But I will," said Judith. She made her escape, and met Percival Thorne on her way to Bellevue street.

"And now what is to be done?" she asked, looking up at him when she had told him all. "No letter—no sign of Bertie."

Percival might not be very ready with expedients, but his calmness and reserve gave an impression of greater resources than he actually possessed. He hesitated while Judith spoke, but he did not show it. There was a pause, during which he caught at an idea, and uttered it without a trace of indecision. "I'll look up Gordon," he said, glancing at his watch. "If Gordon told Bertie of this situation, he may be able to tell us where a tele-

gram would find him. Perhaps he may explain this mysterious little note. If we can satisfactorily account for his absence, we shall have nothing to say about Bertie, except to justify him if any one else should bring his name into the affair. And you could do your best to help Mr. Nash and Miss Crawford in their search."

"Yes, but where will you find Mr. Gordon?"

"He's a clerk at a factory in Hill street. I will go at once." And he hurried off.

Judith went to the window and looked after him with a despairing sense of loneliness in her heart. The little maid asked her if the dinner should be brought in, and she answered in a tone that she hoped was cheerful.

Miss Bryant came in with a dish and set it on the table. She seldom helped in this way, and Judith divined the motive. Conscious that she was narrowly scanned, she tried to assume a careless air, and turned away so that the light should not fall on her face. But Lydia said nothing. She looked at Judith doubtfully, curiously, anxiously: her lips parted, but no word came. Judith began to eat as if in defiance.

Lydia hesitated on the threshold, and then went away. "Stuck-up thing!" she exclaimed as soon as she was safe in the passage. "But what has he been doing? Oh, I must and will know!"

Percival returned before Judith's time had expired, and came into the room with a grave face and eyes that would not meet hers.

"Tell me," she said.

He turned away and studied a colored lithograph on the wall. "It wasn't true," he said. "Gordon was at the last practicing, but he never said a word about this organist's situation. In fact, Bertie left before the choir separated."

"Some one else might have told him," said Judith.

There was a pause. "I fear not," said Percival, intently examining a very blue church-spire in one corner of the picture. "In fact, Miss Lisle, I don't see how any one could. There is no vacancy for an

organist there—no prospect of any vacancy. I ascertained that."

Another pause, a much longer one. Percival had turned away from the lithograph, but now he was looking at a threadbare place in the carpet as thoughtfully as if he would have to pay for a new one. He touched it lightly with his foot, and perceived that it would soon wear into a hole.

"I must go back to Miss Crawford," said Judith suddenly. He bent his head in silent acquiescence. "What am I to tell her?" She lifted a book from the table, and laid it down again with a quivering hand. "Oh, it is too cruel!" she said in a low voice. "No one could expect it of me. My own brother!"

"That's true. No one could expect it."

"And yet—" said Judith. "Miss Crawford—Emmeline. Oh, Mr. Thorne, tell me what I ought to do."

"How can I? I don't know what to say. Why do you attempt to decide now? You may safely leave it till the time comes."

"Safely?"

"Yes. You will not do less than your duty."

She hesitated, having a woman's craving for something to which she might cling, something definite and settled. "It is not certain," she said at last.

"No," he answered. "Bertie has deceived you, but it may be for some foolish scheme of his own. He may be guiltless of this: it is only a suspicion still."

"Well, I will go," said Judith again. "Oh, if only he had come home!"

"There is a choir-practice to-night," said Percival. "If all is well he will be back in time for that. They have no doubt of his coming. Why not leave a note?"

She took a sheet of paper and wrote on it—

"MY DEAREST BROTHER:" ("If he comes back he will be best and dearest," she thought as she wrote. It had come to this, that it was necessary to justify the loving words! "If he comes back, oh how shall I ever atone to him?") "Come to me at once at Standon Square. Do not lose a moment, I entreat you.

"Yours always, JUDITH."

She folded and addressed it, and laid it where he could not fail to see it as he came in. Then, having put on her hat, she turned to go.

"Let me walk with you," said Percival. Lydia met them on the stairs and cast a look of scornful anger on Miss Lisle. "Much she cares!" the girl muttered. "*He* doesn't come back, but she can go walking about with her young man! Those two won't miss him much."

Thorne saw his companion safely to Standon Square, and then went to the office. He was late, a thing which had never happened before, and, though he did his best to make up for lost time, he failed signally. His thoughts wandered from his work to dwell on Judith Lisle, and, if truth be confessed, on the dinner, which he had forgotten while with her. He was tired and faint. The lines seemed to swim before his eyes, and he hardly grasped the sense of what he wrote. Once he awoke from a reverie and found himself staring blankly at an ink-spot on the dingy desk. The young clerk on his right was watching him with a look of curiosity, in which there was as much malevolence as his feeble features could express, and when Thorne met his eyes he turned away with an unpleasant smile. It seemed as if six o'clock would never come, but it struck at last, and Percival escaped and made his way to Bellevue street.



CHAPTER XLVI.

THE RESULT OF PERCIVAL'S ECONOMY.



JUDITH'S letter lay on the table still. Bertie had not come to claim it, and she had not come home.

Having ascertained these facts, Percival went to his own room, and, finding his tea set ready for him, ate and drank hurriedly, hesitating whether he should go and meet her. Standing by the window he looked out on the darkening street. All vulgarity of detail was lost in the softening dusk, and there was something almost picturesque in the opposite roof, whose outline was delicately drawn on the pale-blue sky. Everything was refined, subdued and shadowy in the tender light, but Percival, gazing, saw no charm in the little twilight picture. Sorrow may be soothed by quiet loveliness, but perplexities absorb all our faculties, and we do not heed the beauty of the world, which is simple and unperplexed. If it is forced upon our notice, the contrast irritates us: it is almost an impertinence. Percival would have been angry had he been called upon to feel the poetry which Bertie had found only a few days before in the bit of houseleek

growing on that arid waste of tiles. It is true that in that dim light the houseleek was only a dusky little knob.

Should he go and meet Judith? Should he wait for her? What would she do? Should he go to St. Sylvester's? By the time he could reach the church the choristers would have assembled: would the organist be there? While he doubted what to do his fingers were in his waistcoat pocket, and he incidentally discovered that he had only a shilling and a threepenny-piece in it. He went quickly to the table and struck a light. Since he had enrolled himself as Judith Lisle's true knight, ready to go anywhere or render her any service in her need, it would be as well to be better provided with the sinews of war. He unlocked the little writing-case which stood on a side table.

Percival's carefulness in money matters had helped him very much in his poverty. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to him that, since his income was fixed, his expenditure must be made to fit it. He hardly understood the difficulties of that numerous class of which Bertie was an example—men who consider certain items of expenditure as fixed and unchangeable, let their income be what it may. But Percival had retained one remembrance of his wealthier days, a familiarity with money. People who have been stinted all their lives are accustomed to handle silver and copper, but are anxious about gold and frightened at notes or cheques. Percival, though he was quite conscious of the relative greatness of small sums to his narrow means, retained the old habit of thinking them small, and never bestowed an anxious thought on the little hoard in his desk. As he went to it that evening he remembered with sudden pleasure that there was the money that had been accumulating for some time in readiness for Mrs. Bryant's return. He could borrow from that if need were.

The money was gone.

Percival stood up and stared vaguely round the room. Then, unable to believe in his misfortune, he emptied out the contents of the desk upon the table and tossed them over in a hurried search. A carelessly-folded paper caught his eye as something unfamiliar. He opened it and read:

"DEAR THORNE: You were good enough to let me borrow of you once when I was in a scrape. I am in a worse difficulty now, and, as I have not the chance of asking your leave, I've ventured to help myself. You shall have it back again in a few days, with an explanation of this cool proceeding.

"H. L."

Percival threw the letter down, and walked to the window again. It was clear enough now. Bertie had had no need to borrow eight or nine pounds if he were only going out for the day to inquire about a situation as organist. But if a man is running off with a young lady it will not do to have an absolutely empty purse. Even though she may be an heiress, he cannot very well begin by asking her to pay his railway-fare. "It would define the relative positions a little *too* clearly," thought Percival with a scornful smile.

"Will she hope still?" was his next thought. "It is not utterly impossible, I suppose, that Master Bertie has bolted alone. One couldn't swear he hadn't. Bolted he certainly has, but if she *will* hope I can't say that I know he has gone with Miss Nash. Though I am sure he has: how else would he undertake to repay me in a few days? Unless that is only a figure of speech."

He suddenly remembered the time when Bertie left his debt unpaid after a similar promise, and he went back to his desk with a new anxiety. His talisman, the half-sovereign which was to have been treasured to his dying day, had shared the fate of the commonplace coins which were destined for Mrs. Bryant and his bootmaker. It was a cruel blow, but Percival saw the absurd side of his misfortune, and laughed aloud in spite of himself.

"My sentiment hasn't prospered: it might just as well have been a three-penny-piece! Ah, well! it would be unreasonable to complain," he reflected, "since Bertie has promised to send my souvenir back again. Very thoughtful of him! It will be a little remembrance of Emmeline Nash when it comes, and not of Judith Lisle: that will be the only difference. Quite unimportant, of course. Upon my word, Lisle went about it in a systematic fashion. Pity he gave his attention to music: a distinguished burglar was lost to society when he turned organist." He took up the paper and glanced at it again. "If I show this to her she will pay his debt, as she did last time; and that she never shall do." He doubled it up and thrust it in with the rest.

A shuffling step in the passage, a knock at the door, and Emma made her appearance: "Miss Lisle has come in, sir."

Percival looked up a little astonished, but he only thanked her in his quiet voice and closed his desk. He turned the key, and waited a moment till Emma should have gone before he obeyed the summons. When, answering Judith's "Come in," he entered the Lisles' room, he found her standing by the window. She turned and looked at him, as if she were not quite certain whom to expect.

"It is I," he said. "Thank you for sending for me."

"Sending for you? I didn't send. But I am glad you came," she added.

She had not sent for him, and Percival remembered that he had passed Lydia Bryant on his way. The message—which, after all, was a mere statement of a fact—was hers. He colored angrily and stood confused: "You did not send? No—I see. I beg your pardon—I misunderstood—"

"It makes no difference," said Judith quickly. "Don't go: I wanted to tell you—" She paused: "I have not been unjust, Mr. Thorne. Mr. Nash has been at Standon Square this afternoon. After he had my telegram he received a letter from Emmeline, and it was as I thought. She is with Bertie."

"With Bertie? And he came here?"

"Yes—to see if it was as Emmeline

said, that they were married at St. Andrew's last Tuesday."

Percival looked blankly at her: "Married! It isn't possible, is it?"



"Quite possible," said Judith bitterly. "Standon Square is in St. Andrew's parish, as well as Bellevue street. It seems

that Bertie had only to have the banns mumbled over for three Sundays by an old clergyman whom nobody hears in a

"IT IS I," HE SAID. "THANK YOU FOR SENDING FOR ME."—Page 233.

church where nobody goes. It sounds very easy, doesn't it?"

Percival stood for a moment speechless while the cool audacity of Bertie's proceeding filtered slowly into his mind. "But if any one had gone to St. Andrew's?" he said at last.

"That would have ended it, of course. I suppose he would have run away without Emmeline. If I had gone that Sunday when I had arranged to go, for instance. Yes, that would have been very awkward, wouldn't it, Mr. Thorne? Only, you see, Bertie happened to be ill that morning, and I couldn't leave him. You remember you were good enough to go to church with us."

"I remember," said Percival with a scornful smile as he recalled the devoted attention with which he had escorted the young organist to St. Sylvester's.

"He must have enjoyed that walk, I should think," said Judith, still very quietly. Her unopened note was on the table, where she had placed it that morning. She took it up and tore it into a hundred pieces. "You have heard people talk of broken hearts, haven't you?" she said.

"Often," he answered.

"Well, then, Bertie has broken Miss Crawford's. She said this morning that she should never hold up her head again if this were true; and I believe she never will."

"Do you mean she will die of it?" said Thorne, aghast.

"Not directly, perhaps, but I am sure she will die the sooner for it. All her pride in her life's work is gone. She feels that she is disgraced. I could not bear to see her this afternoon, utterly ashamed and humble before that man."

"What did he say?"

"Some things I won't tell you." A quick blush dyed her face. "Naturally, he was angry: he had good reason to be. And when he told her she was past her work, she moaned, poor thing! while the tears rained down her cheeks, and only said, 'God forgive me—yes.'"

Percival could but echo her pity. "Bertie never thought—" he began.

"Never thought? When our trouble

came," said Judith, "we had plenty of friends better able to do something for us, but, somehow, they didn't. And when there was the talk of Bertie's coming here, and I remembered her and asked her if she could help me to a situation anywhere in the neighborhood, she wrote to me to come to her at once, and she would do all she could to help Bertie too. I have her letter still. She said she longed to know me for my mother's sake, and was sure she would soon love me for my own. And this afternoon she prayed God she might never see my face again!"

"She thinks you are to blame, then?" said Thorne.

"Yes; and am I not?" was the quick reply. "Ought I not to have known Bertie better? And I did know him: that is the worst of it. I did not expect this, and yet I ought to have been on my guard. He has been my one study from first to last. From the time that he was a little boy—the bonniest little boy that ever was!—my life has been all Bertie. I remember him, with long curls hanging down his back and his gray eyes opened wide, when he stood on tiptoe at the piano and touched the little tunes that he had heard, and looked over his shoulder at me and laughed for pleasure in his music. I can see his little baby-fingers—the little soft fingers I used to kiss—on the keys now.—Oh, Bertie, why didn't you die then?"

She stopped as if checked by a sudden thought, and looked so quickly up at Percival that she caught an answer in his eyes that he would never have uttered.

"Ah, yes, he would have been the same," she said. "He *was* the same then: I know it. They used to praise me, when I was a child, for giving everything up to Bertie. As if he were not my happiness! And it has been so always. And now I have sacrificed Miss Crawford to Bertie—my dear old friend, my mother's friend, who is worth ten times as much as Bertie ever was or ever will be! Is not this a fine ending of all?"

Percival broke the silence after a moment's pause. "Is it an ending of all?" he said. "Bertie has been very wrong,

• but it has been partly thoughtlessness. He is very young, and if he should do well hereafter may there not even yet be a future to which you may look forward? As for the world, it is not disposed to look on a runaway match of this sort as a crime."

She turned her eyes full upon him, and he stopped.

"Oh, the world!" she said. "The world will consider it a sort of young Lochinvar affair, no doubt. But how much of the young Lochinvar do you think there is about Bertie, Mr. Thorne? You have heard him speak of Emmeline Nash sometimes—not as often nor as freely as he has spoken to me; still, you have heard him. And judging from that, do you believe he is in love with her?"

"Well—no," said Thorne reluctantly. "Hardly that."

"A thousand times no! If by any possibility he had loved her, foolishly, madly, with a passion that blinded him to the cruel wrong he was doing, it would all have been different. I should have blamed him, but in spite of Miss Crawford I should have forgiven him; I should have had hope; he would have been my Bertie still; I should not have despised him. But this is cold and base and horrible: he has simply sold himself for Emmeline's money—sold himself, his smiles and his pretty speeches and his handsome face. And now it is all over."

As Judith spoke Percival understood for the first time what a woman's voice could be. The girl's soul was filled and shaken with passion. She did not cry aloud nor rant, but every accent thrilled through him from head to foot. And it seemed to him that she needed no words—that, had she been speaking in an unknown tongue, the very intonation, the mere sound, the vibration of her voice, would have told him of her wounded heart, her despair, her unavailing sorrow, her bitter shame, so eloquent it was. He did not think all this, but in a passing moment felt it. "I fear it is all too true," he said. "I don't know what to say nor how to help you. Your brother—"

"Don't call him that: he is no brother

of mine. Ah yes, God help me, he *is* my brother; and I think we Lisles bring sorrow to all who are good to us. We have to you, have we not? Don't stay here, Mr. Thorne: don't try to help me. Remember that I am of the same blood as my father, who robbed you—as Bertie, who has been so base."

"And if Judas himself were your brother, what then?" Percival demanded. His voice, in its masculine vigor and fulness, broke forth suddenly, like a strong creature held till then in a leash. "And as for the money, what of that? I am glad it is gone, or I should not have been here to-day."

No, he would not have needed to turn clerk and earn his living. He would not have gone to Brackenhill to confess his poverty. He might never have discovered anything. Most likely he would long since have been Sissy's husband. Sissy seemed far away now. He had loved her—yes. Oh, poor little Sissy, who had clung to him! But what were these new feelings that thronged his heart as he looked at Judith Lisle? He stopped abruptly. What had he said?

Judith too looked at him, and grew suddenly calm and still. "You are very good," she said. "I should have been very lonely to-day if I had not had a friend. It has been a comfort to speak out what I felt, though I'm afraid I've talked foolishly."

"One can't weigh all one's words," said Percival.

"No," she answered; "and I know you will not remember my folly."

"At any rate, I will not forget that you have trusted me. You are tired," he said gently: "you ought to rest. There is nothing to be done to-night."

"Nothing," she answered hopelessly.

"And to-morrow, if there is anything that I can do, you will send for me, will you not?"

She smiled.

"Promise me that," he urged in a tone of authority. "You will?"

"Yes, I promise."

Sometimes, when clouds roll up, black with thunder and rain, to overshadow the heavens and to deluge the earth, between

their masses you may catch a momentary gleam of blue, faint and infinitely far away, deep, untroubled, most beautiful. Judith had caught such a glimpse that evening as she bade Percival good-night.

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONSEQUENCES.

THE story of the elopement was in all the local papers, which seemed for once to be printed on Judith Lisle's heart. It was the latest and most exciting topic of conversation in the neighborhood of Standon Square and St. Sylvester's, and was made doubly interesting by the utter collapse of Mr. Clifton's Easter services, which were to have been something very remarkable indeed. Every one recollected the young organist who was so handsome and who played so divinely. People forgot that his father had failed very disgracefully, and only remembered that Bertie had once been in a much better position. There was a sort of general impression that he was an aristocratic young hero who lived in lofty poverty, and was a genius into the bargain. No one was very precise about it, but Beethoven and Mendelssohn and all those people were likely to find themselves eclipsed some fine morning. Emmeline Nash of course became a heroine to match, vaguely sketched as slim, tall and fair. She had stayed on at Miss Crawford's at an age when a girl's education is generally supposed to be finished, and she had not always gone home for the holidays. These facts were of course the germs of a romance. There was a quarrel with her father, who wished her to marry some one. No one knew who the some one might be, but as he was only a shadowy figure in the background, his name was of no importance. Emmeline and her music-master had fallen in love at first sight; and when the moment came for the girl to return home, to be persecuted by her father's threats and by the attentions of the shadowy lover, her heart had failed her and she had consented to fly with the young

musician. As Judith had said, it was a young Lochinvar romance—a boy-and-girl attachment. No one seemed to think much the worse of Bertie. Hardly any one called him a fortune-hunter, for Emmeline's money seemed trivial compared with the wealth that he was supposed to have once possessed. And no one thought anything at all of Judith herself or of Miss Crawford.

It would soon be over and forgotten, but Judith suffered acutely while it lasted. Perhaps it was well that she was forced to think about her own prospects, which were none of the brightest.

"Shall you go to Rookleigh?" Percival asked her a couple of days later.

She shook her head: "No: I'm too proud, I suppose, or too miserable: I can't have my failure here talked over. Aunt Lisle's conversation is full of sharp little pin-pricks, which are all very well when they don't go straight into one's heart."

He saw her lip quiver as she turned her face away. "Where will you go, then?" he asked with gentle persistence. It was partly on his own account, for he feared that a blow was in store for him, and he wanted to know the worst.

"I shall not go anywhere. I shall not leave Brenthill."

The blood seemed to rush strongly to his heart: his veins were full of warm life. She would not leave Brenthill!

"I will stay, at any rate, while Miss Crawford remains here. She will not speak to me, she has forbidden me to attempt to see her, but I cannot go away and leave her here alone. I may not be of any use—I do not suppose I shall be—but while she is here I will not go."

"But if she left?"

"Still, I would not leave Brenthill if I could get any work to do. I feel as if I must stay here, if only to show that I have not gone away with Bertie to live on Emmeline's money. Poor Emmeline! And when he used to talk of my not working any more, and he would provide for me, I thought he meant that he would make a fortune with his opera. What a fool I was!"

"It was a folly to be proud of."

He was rewarded with a faint smile, but the delicate curve of the girl's lips relaxed into sadness all too soon.

The table at her side was strewn with sheets of roughly-blotted music, mixed with others daintily neat, which Judith herself had copied. "His opera," she repeated, laying the leaves in order. "Emmeline will be promoted to the office of critic and admirer now, I suppose. But I think the admiration will be too indiscriminate even for Bertie. Poor Emmeline!"

"What are you going to do with all these?" said Thorne, laying his hand on the papers.

"I am putting them together to send to him. I had a letter this morning, so I know his address now. He seems very hopeful, as usual, and thinks her father will forgive them before long."

"And do you think there is a chance of it?"

"No, I don't. Bertie did not hear what Mr. Nash said that afternoon to Miss Crawford and to me," she replied; and once again the color rushed to her face at the remembrance.

"Miss Lisle," said Percival suddenly, "I am ready to make every allowance for Mr. Nash, but if—"

"Oh, it was nothing. He was angry, as he had reason to be: that was all. And you see I am not used to angry men."

"I should hope not. I wish I had been there."

"And I don't," said Judith softly. "I think you might not have been very patient, and I felt that one ought to be patient for Miss Crawford's sake. Besides, if you had been there I could not have— Bertie writes in capital spirits," she continued with a sudden change of tone. "He wants me to go and join them. He is just the same as ever, only rather proud of himself."

"Proud of himself! In Heaven's name, why?"

"Why, he is only two-and-twenty, and has secured a comfortable income for the rest of his life by his own exertions. Naturally, he is proud of himself." Percival had learned now that

Judith never suffered more keenly than when she spoke of Bertie in a jesting tone, and it pained him for her sake. He looked sorrowfully at her. "Mr. Thorne," she went on, "he does not even suspect that what he has done is anything but praiseworthy and rather clever. He does not so much as mention Miss Crawford. And I am haunted by a feeling that we have somehow wronged my mother by wronging her old friend."

Percival did not tell her that he too had had a letter from Bertie. It was in his pocket as he stood there, and when he went away he took it out and read it again.

Bertie was as light-hearted as she had said. He enclosed an order for the money taken from the desk, and hoped Thorne had not wanted it; or, if he had been put to any inconvenience, he must forgive him this once, as he, Lisle, did not suppose he should ever run away in that style again.

"I think the old man will come round without much fuss," Bertie went on. "We have been very penitent—the waste of note-paper before we could get our feelings properly expressed was something frightful; but the money was well laid out, for we have heard from him again, and there is a perceptible softening in the tone of his letter. Emmeline assures me that he is passionately fond of music, and reminds me how anxious he was that she should learn to play. The reasoning does not exactly convince me, but if the old fellow does but imagine that he has a passion for music I will conquer him through that. And if the worst comes to the worst, and he is as stony-hearted as one of his own fossils, we have only to manage for this year, and we must come into our money when Emmeline is twenty-one. But I have no fear. He will relent, and we shall be comfortably settled under the paternal roof long before Christmas."

"What did old Clifton say and do when he found I had bolted? And how did the Easter services go off? Those blessed Easter services that he was in such a state of mind about! Was he

very savage? Send me as graphic a description as you can.

"Excuse a smudge, but Emmeline and I are bound to do a good deal of hugging and kissing just now—a honeymoon after an elopement is something remarkably sweet, as you may suppose—and her sleeve brushed the wet ink. This particular embrace was on the occasion of her departure to put on her things. We are going out.

"Don't they say that married women always give up their accomplishments? Emmeline is a married woman, therefore Emmeline will give up her music. How soon do you suppose she will begin?"

Half a page more of Bertie's random scribble brought him to a conclusion, but it was not a final one, for he had added a couple of lines: "P. S. Persuade J. to shake herself free of Brent-hill as soon as possible: there can be no need for her to work now, thank God! You know it has always been my day-dream and hope to provide for her. You must come and see us too. Come soon, before we go to my father-in-law's. Good-bye: we are off.—P. S. No. 2. No, we are not. E. has forgotten her parasol, and is gone for it. How is Lydia? What did she say when she heard the news? I suppose by this time everybody knows it."

Percival's lip curved with scorn and disgust as he refolded the letter, in which Emmeline, Judith and Lydia jostled each other as they might have done in a bad dream. Then he looked up, being suddenly aware of eyes that were fixed upon him.

Miss Bryant stood in the doorway: "You've heard from *him*, Mr. Thorne?"

Percival did not choose to answer as if he were in Miss Bryant's secrets and knew as a matter of course that "*him*" meant Lisle. Neither did he choose to say that he did not know who was intended by the energetic pronoun. He looked back at Lydia politely and inquiringly, as if he awaited further information before he could be expected to reply.

"Oh, you know," said Lydia scorn-

fully. "You have heard from Mr. Bertie Lisle?"

"Yes," Percival acquiesced gravely.

"Well?"

"Well—what, Miss Bryant?"

"What does he say?" Lydia demanded; and when Thorne arched his brows, "Oh, you needn't look as if you thought it wasn't my business. I've a right to ask after him, at any rate, for old acquaintance' sake."

"I'm sorry to hear you take so much interest in him," he rejoined.

"Why? You may keep your sorrow for your own affairs: I'll manage mine. I can take very good care of myself, I assure you, and I won't trouble you to be sorry for me," said Lydia shortly. I do not think she had ever spoken to a young man before and been unconscious that it *was* a young man to whom she spoke. But she was utterly heedless of Percival as she questioned him, and he perceived it, and preferred this angry mood. "Can't you tell me anything about him?" said the girl. "Is he well—happy?"

"He writes in the best of spirits."

Lydia advanced a step or two: "And is it all true what they are saying? He has married this young lady?"

"Yes, he has married her."

"And do you suppose he cares for her?" said Lydia slowly.

Thorne's brows went up again: "Really, Miss Bryant—"

"Because if he does, he has told lies enough: that's all."

("And he isn't a miracle of honor if he doesn't," said Percival.)

"But that's quite likely," Lydia went on, unheeding. "I knew all the time that he didn't mean any good. He thought I believed him, but I didn't—not more than half, anyhow. But when he went away I didn't guess it was for this."

"You knew he was going?" Thorne said.

Lydia half smiled, in conscious superiority.

"You don't seem to have served yourself particularly well by keeping his secrets. You are deceived at last, like the rest."

"Well, if I haven't served myself I've served him," said Lydia. "And I don't know but what I am glad of it. He wasn't as stuck-up and proud as some people. One likes to be looked at and spoken to as if one wasn't dirt under people's feet. And, after all, I don't see that there's any harm done." There were red rims to Lydia's eyes, telling of tears which must surely have been too persistent to pass for tears of joy at the tidings of Bertie's elopement. "I suppose a marriage like that is all right?" she asked with a quick glance.

"Of course—no doubt of it," said Percival very shortly. He had pitied her a moment earlier.

"Ah! I supposed so. But things ain't always all right when people run away. And the money's all right too, is it?"

"Some of it, at any rate," said Thorne, taking a book from the table.

"Wouldn't he be sure to take care of that! And there's more to come if the father likes, isn't there? He'll get that too: see if he doesn't."

"It is to be hoped he will—for Mrs. Lisle's sake. Otherwise, I cannot say I care to discuss his prospects."

"Well," said Lydia after a pause, during which she turned a ring slowly on her finger—"well, I'll wish him all the happiness he deserves."

Percival's lip curved a little: "Miss Bryant, are you absolutely pitiless?"

Lydia's expression was rather blank. "What do you mean? No, I ain't," she said. "I've nothing more to do with him. He hasn't done me any harm, and I won't wish him any. At least, only a little." With which small ebullition of feminine tenderness and spite she fled hurriedly down stairs to shed a few more tears, and left Thorne to write his letter to Lisle. It was brief, and none the sweeter for that recent interview.

"I return the money," Percival wrote, "which you say was so useful to you. I know that what you have sent me is not yours, but your wife's, and I cannot conscientiously say that I think Mrs. Herbert Lisle is indebted to me in any way.

"I have not delivered your message to your sister. I have no wish to insult her

in her trouble, and I know she would feel such persuasion a cruel insult, as indeed I think it would be."

Judith at the same time was writing:

"From this time our paths must lie apart. I will never touch a penny of your wife's money. Do not dare to offer me a share of it again. It seems to me that all the shame and sorrow is mine, and you have only the prosperity. Not for the whole world would I change burdens with you.

"Miss Crawford is going to give up her school at once. She will not see or speak to me, for she suspects me of having been your accomplice. And I cannot help blaming myself that I trusted you so foolishly. But I could not have believed that you would have been false to her—our one friend, our mother's friend. Is it possible that you do not see that every one under her roof should have been sacred to you? But what is the use of saying anything now?

"I don't know, after this, how to appeal to you, and I don't want any promises; but if you feel any regret for the pain you have caused, and if you really wish to do anything for me, I entreat you to be good to Emmeline. It is the only favor I will ever ask of you. She is young and weak, poor girl! and she has trusted you utterly. In God's name, do not repay her trust as you have repaid Miss Crawford's and mine!"

Bertie's incredulous amazement was visible in every line of his answer to Percival:

"Are you both cracked—you and Judith—or am I dreaming? I have read your letters a score of times, and I think I understand them less than I did. Here are sweet bells jangled out of tune with a vengeance, and Heaven only knows what all the row is about: I don't.

"Do you suppose a man never made a runaway match before? And how could I do otherwise than as I did? Was I to stop and consult all the old women in the parish about it—ask Miss Crawford's blessing, and get my sister to look out my train for me and pack my portmanteau? Can't you see that I was obliged to deceive you a little?

"And what is amiss with the marriage itself? It is true that just now Emmeline has the money and I have none, but do you suppose I am going to remain in obscurity all my life? A few years hence you shall own that it was not at all a bad match for her. Old Nash is nobody, though he is clever enough in his own way. His father was a tailor, and made a good lot of money so. By the way, he is certainly coming round (Mr. Nash, I mean, not my grandfather-in-law the tailor: he is dead), and if he doesn't object, why should anybody else?"

"If I have done Miss Crawford any harm, I'm very sorry of course. Can't I help her in some way?"

The reply to Judith's letter came in a feeble, girlish handwriting. It began: "Herbert tells me you are angry with him because he deceived you about our marriage," and it ended, "Your affectionate sister, EMMELINE LISLE." The writer was evidently in the seventh heaven of bliss. Her letter was an attempt at persuading Judith, but it was sprinkled all over with fond allusions to Bertie—"My dear, dear husband," "my own dearest," "darlingest Herbert," "my own love;" and in one place there was an unnecessary little parenthesis: "He is such a *dear*, you know!" It was silly enough to be maddening, but it was wonderfully happy, with the writer's adoration of Bertie and her serene certainty that Bertie adored her. Clearly, no shadow of doubt had crossed Emmeline's mind. There was not such another man in all the world as Herbert Lisle, and she was his ideal woman. Every other girl must envy her the prize she had won. Even his sister was jealous and angry when she found that she held only the second place in his affections. Emmeline, elated by her proud position, reasoned sweetly with the unreasonable Judith, who read the foolish scribble with mingled irritation, laughter, contempt, and almost tears. At the end were three lines in another hand: "Judith, you *must* let me send you some money. If you don't understand why yet, you will soon. You really must."

"Does he think I can't get a situation

without his help?" Judith wondered. She smiled, for she had found one. Mrs. Barton had come to her assistance—Mrs. Barton, whose stupid little daughter Judith was still patiently teaching. She understood the girl's wish to remain at Brenthill: she believed in her and sympathized with her, and exerted herself in her behalf. She brought her the offer of a situation in a school for little boys, where she would live in the house and have a small salary. "It won't be like Miss Crawford's, you know," the good lady said.

"It will do, whatever it is," Judith answered.

"It is a school of quite a different class. Miss Macgregor is a woman who drives hard bargains. She will overwork you, I'm afraid: I only hope she won't underfeed you. You will certainly be underpaid. She takes advantage of the cause of your leaving Standon Square, and of the fact that you can't ask Miss Crawford for testimonials. She is delighted at the idea of getting a really good teacher for next to nothing."

"Still, it is in Brenthill," said Judith, "and that is the great thing. Thank you very much, Mrs. Barton. I will take it."

"She will reopen school in about ten days."

"That will suit me very well, won't it? I must pack up here, and settle everything." And Judith cast a desolate glance round the room where she had come with such happy hopes to begin a new life with Bertie.

Mrs. Barton's eyes were fixed on her. "I am half inclined now to wish I hadn't said anything about Miss Macgregor at all," she remarked.

"Why? If you only knew how grateful I am!"

"That's just it. Grateful! And that schoolmistress will work you to death: I know she will."

"She must take a little time about it," said the girl with a smile. "Perhaps before she has quite finished I may hear of something else. What I want is something to enable me to stay at Brenthill, and this will answer the purpose."

Mrs. Barton stood up to go. "I've made one stipulation," she said. "Miss Macgregor will let you come to us every Wednesday afternoon to give Janie her lesson."

"Oh, how good you are!" Judith exclaimed. "I thought all that must be over."

"I wish I could have you altogether," Mrs. Barton said. "It would be charming for Janie, and for me too. But, unfortunately, that can't be." She had her hand on the handle of the half-open door. As she spoke there was a quick step on the stairs, and Percival Thorne went by. A slanting light from the window in the passage fell on his sombre, olive-tinted face with a curiously picturesque effect. An artist might have painted him, emerging thus from the dusky shadows. He carried himself with a defiant pride—was he not Judith's friend and champion?—and bowed, with a glance that was at once eager and earnest, when he caught sight of the young girl behind her friend's substantial figure. His strongly-marked courtesy was so evidently natural that it could not strike any one as an exaggeration of ordinary manners, but rather as the perfection of some other manners, no matter whether those of a nation or a time, or only his own. Mrs. Barton was startled and interested by the sudden apparition. The good lady was romantic in her tastes, and this was like a glimpse of a living novel. "Who was that?" she asked hurriedly.

"Mr. Thorne. He lodges here," said Judith.

"A friend of your brother's?"

"He was very good to my brother."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Barton. "My dear, he is very handsome."

Judith smiled.

"He is!" exclaimed her friend. "Don't say he isn't, for I sha'n't believe you mean it. He is *very* handsome—like a Spaniard, like a cavalier, like some one in a tragedy. Now, isn't he?"

Mrs. Barton's romantic feelings found no outlet in her daily round of household duties. Mr. Barton was good, but commonplace; so was Janie; and Mrs. Barton was quite conscious that there was

nothing poetical or striking in her own appearance. But Miss Lisle, with her "great, grave grievous air," was fit to take a leading part in poem or drama, and here was a man worthy to play hero passing her on the staircase of a dingy lodging-house! Mrs. Barton built up a romance in a moment, and was quite impatient to bid Judith farewell, that she might work out the details as she walked along the street.

The unconscious hero of her romance was divided between pleasure and regret when he heard of the treaty concluded with Miss Macgregor. It was much that Judith could remain at Brenthill, but one day, on his way to dinner, he went and looked at the outside of the house which was to be her home, and its aspect did not please him. It stood in a gloomy street: it was prim, straight, narrow, and altogether hideous. A tiny bit of arid garden in front gave it a prudish air of withdrawing from the life and traffic of the thoroughfare. The door opened as Percival looked, and a woman came out, frigid, thin-lipped and sandy-haired. She paused on the step and gave an order to the servant: evidently she was Miss Macgregor. Percival's heart died within him. "That harpy!" he said under his breath. The door closed behind her, and there was a prison-like sound of making fast within. The young man turned and walked away, oppressed by a sense of gray dreariness. "Will she be able to breathe in that jail?" he wondered to himself. "Bellevue street is a miserable hole, but at least one is free there." He prolonged his walk a little, and went through Standon Square. It was bright and pleasant in the spring sunshine, and the trees in the garden had little leaves on every twig. A man was painting the railings of Montague House, and another was putting a brass plate on the door. There was a new name on it: Miss Crawford's reign was over for ever.

Percival counted the days that still remained before Judith's bondage would begin and Bellevue street be desolate as of old. Yet, though he prized every hour, they were miserable days. Lydia

Bryant haunted him—not with her former airs and graces, but with malicious hints in her speech and little traps set for Miss Lisle and himself. She would gladly have found an occasion for slander, and Percival read her hate of Judith in the cunning eyes which watched them both. He felt that he had already been unwary, and his blood ran cold as he thought of possible gossip, and the manner in which Lydia's insinuations would be made. Precious as those few days were, he longed for the end. He thought more than once of leaving Bellevue street, but such a flight was impossible. He was chained there by want of money. He could not pay his debt to Mrs. Bryant for weeks, and he could not leave while it was unpaid. Day after day he withdrew himself more, and grew almost cold in his reserve, hoping to escape from Lydia. One morning, as they passed on the stairs, he looked back and caught a glance from Judith never intended to meet his eye—a sad and wondering glance—which made his heart ache, even while filling it with the certainty that he was needed. He answered only with another glance. It seemed to him to convey nothing of what he felt, but nevertheless it woke a light in the girl's eyes. Moved by a quick impulse, Percival looked up, and following his example, Judith lifted her head and saw Miss Bryant leaning over the banisters and watching them with a curiosity which changed to an unpleasant smile when she found herself observed. It was a revelation to Judith. She fled into her room, flushing hotly with indignation against Lydia for her spitefully suggestive watchfulness; with shame for herself that Percival's sense of her danger should have been keener than her own; and with generous pride and confidence in him. Thus to have been guarded might have been an intolerable humiliation, but Judith found some sweetness even in the sting. It was something new to her to be cared for and shielded; and while she resolved to be more careful in future, her dominant feeling was of disgust at the curiosity which could so misunderstand the truest and purest of friendships.

"*He* understands me, at any rate," said poor Judith to herself, painfully conscious of her glowing cheeks. "*He* understands me: he will not think ill of me, but he shall never have to fear for me again." It might be questioned whether Percival did altogether understand her. If he did, he was more enlightened than Judith herself.

After that day she shrank from Percival, and they hardly saw each other till she left. She knew his hours of going and coming, and was careful to remain in her room, though it might be that the knowledge drew her to the window that looked into Bellevue street. As for Percival, though he never sought her, it seemed to him that his sense of hearing was quickened. Judith's footstep on the stairs was always distinct to him, and the tone of her voice if she spoke to Miss Bryant or Emma was noted and remembered. It is true that this strained anxiety sometimes made him an involuntary listener to gossip or household arrangements in which Miss Lisle took no active part. One day there was a hurried conversation just outside his door.

"Did you give it to her?" said Lydia's voice.

Emma replied, "Yes'm."

"Open? Just as it came? Just as I gave it to you?"

Emma again replied, "Yes'm."

"Did she look surprised?"

"She gave a little jump, miss," said Emma deliberately, as if weighing her words, "and she looked at it back and front."

"Well, what then? Go on."

"Oh! then she laid it down and said it was quite right, and she'd see about it."

Lydia laughed. "I think there'll be some more—" she said. Percival threw the tongs into the fender, and the dialogue came to an abrupt termination. "She" who gave a little jump was Miss Lisle, of course. But there would be some more—What? The young man revolved the matter gloomily in his mind as he paced to and fro within the narrow limits of his room. A natural impulse had caused him to interrupt Lydia's triumphant speech, which he knew was not

intended for his ears, but her laugh rang in the air and mocked him. What was the torture that she had devised and whose effects she so curiously analyzed? There would be more— What?

He thought of it that night, he thought of it the next morning, and still he could not solve the mystery. But as he came from the office in the middle of the day he passed his bootmaker's, and the worthy man, who was holding the door open for a customer to go out, stopped him with an apology. Percival's heart beat fast: never before had he stood face to face with a tradesman and felt that he could not pay him what he owed. His bill had not yet been sent in, and the man had never shown any inclination to hurry him, but he was evidently going to ask for his money now. Percival controlled his face with an effort, prepared for the humiliating confession of his poverty, and found that Mr. Robinson—with profuse excuses for the trouble he was giving—was begging to be told Mr. Lisle's address.

"Mr. Lisle's address?" Thorne repeated the words, but as he did so the matter suddenly became clear to him, and he went on easily: "Oh, I ought to have told you that Mr. Lisle's account was to be sent to me. If you have it there, I'll take it."

Mr. Robinson fetched it with more apologies. He was impressed by the lofty carelessness with which the young man thrust the paper into his pocket, and as Thorne went down the street the little bootmaker looked after him with considerable admiration: "Any one can see he's quite the gentleman, and so was the other. This one'll make his way too, see if he doesn't!" Mr. Robinson imparted these opinions to Mrs. Robinson over their dinner, and was informed in return that he wasn't a prophet, so he needn't think it, and the young men who gave themselves airs and wore smart clothes weren't the ones to get on in the world; and Mrs. Robinson had no patience with such nonsense.

Meanwhile, Percival had gone home with his riddle answered. More— What? More unsuspected debts, more bills of

Bertie's to be sent in to the poor girl who had been so happy in the thought that, although their income was small, at least they owed nothing. Percival's heart ached as he pictured Judith's start of surprise when Emma carried in the open paper, her brave smile, her hurried assurance that it was all right, and Lydia laughing outside at the thought of more to come. "She'll pay them all," said Percival to himself. "She won't take a farthing of that girl's money. She'll die sooner than not pay them, but I incline to think she won't pay this one." His mind was made up long before he reached Bellevue street. If by any sacrifice of pride or comfort he could keep the privilege of helping Judith altogether to himself, he would do so. If that were impossible he would get the money from Godfrey Hammond. But he felt doubtful whether he should like Godfrey Hammond quite as well when he should have asked and received this service at his hands. "I ought to like him all the better if he helped her when I couldn't manage it. It would be abominably unjust if I didn't. In fact, I *must* like him all the better for it: it stands to reason I must. I'll be shot if I should, though! and I don't much think I could ever forgive him."

Percival found that the debt was a small one, and calculated that by a miracle of economy he might pay it out of his salary at the end of the week. Consequently, he dined out two or three days: at least he did not dine at home; but his dissipation did not seem to agree with him, for he looked white and tired. Luckily, he had not to pay for his lodgings till Mrs. Bryant came back, and he sincerely hoped that the good lady would be happy with her sister, Mrs. Smith, till his finances were in better order. When he got his money he lost no time in settling Mr. Robinson's little account, and was fortunate enough to intercept another, about which Mr. Brett the tailor was growing seriously uneasy. He would not for the world have parted with the precious document, but he began to wonder how he should extricate himself from his growing embarrassments. Lydia—

half suspicious, half laughing — made a remark about his continual absence from home. "You are getting to be very gay, ain't you, Mr. Thorne?" she said; and she pulled her curl with her old liveliness, and watched him while she spoke.

"Well, rather so: it does seem like it," he allowed.

"I think you'll be getting too fine for Bellevue street," said the girl: "I'm afraid we ain't scarcely smart enough for you already."

Had she any idea how much he was in their power? Was this a taunt or a chance shot?

"Oh no, I think not," he said. "You see, Miss Bryant, I'm used to Bellevue street now. By the way, I shall dine out again to-morrow."

"What! again to-morrow?" Lydia compressed her lips and looked at him. "Oh, very well: it is a fine thing to have friends make so much of one," she said as she turned to leave the room.

Percival came home late the next evening. As he passed Judith's sitting-room the door stood wide and revealed its desolate emptiness. Was she gone, absolutely gone? And he had been out and had never had a word of farewell from her! Perhaps she had looked for him in the middle of the day and wondered why he did not come. Down stairs he heard Lydia calling to the girl: "Emma, didn't I tell you to put the 'Lodgings' card up in the windows as soon as Miss Lisle was out of the house? It might just as well have been up before. What d'ye mean by leaving

it lying here on the table? You're enough to provoke a saint—that you are! How d'ye know a score of people mayn't have been looking for lodgings to-day, and I dare say there won't be one to-morrow. If ever there was a lazy, good-for-nothing—" The violent slamming of the kitchen-door cut off the remainder of the discourse, but a shrill screaming voice might still be heard. Percival was certain that the tide of eloquence flowed on undiminished, though of articulate words he could distinguish none. It is to be feared that Emma was less fortunate.

It was true, then. Judith was gone, and that without a farewell look or touch of the hand to mark the day! They had lived for months under the same roof, and, though days might pass without granting them a glimpse of each other, the possibility of a meeting was continually with them. It was only that night that Percival, sitting by his cheerless fireside, understood what that possibility had been to him. He consoled himself as well as he could for his ignorance of the hour of Judith's departure by reflecting that Lydia would have followed her about with malicious watchfulness, and would either have played the spy at their interview or invented a parting instead of that which she had not seen. "She can't gossip now," thought Percival.

Meanwhile, Lydia perceived, beyond a doubt, that they must have arranged some way of meeting, since they had not taken the trouble to say "Good-bye."



CHAPTER XLVIII.

ENGAGEMENTS—HOSTILE AND OTHERWISE.



THE fairest season of the year, the debatable ground between spring and summer, had come round once more. There were leaves on the trees and flowers in the grass. The sunshine was golden and full, not like the bleak brightness of March. The winds were warm, the showers soft. Percival, always keenly affected by such influences, felt as if a new life had come to him with the spring. Now that the evenings had grown long and light, he could escape into the country, breathe a purer air and wander in fields and lanes. And as he wandered, musing, it seemed to him that he had awakened from a dream.

He looked back upon the past year, and he was more than half inclined to call himself a fool. He had taken up work for which he was not fit. He could see that now. He knew very well that his life was almost intolerable, and that it would never be more tolerable unless help came from without. He could never grow accustomed to his drudgery. He

could work honestly, but he could never put his heart into it. And even if he could have displayed ten times as much energy, if his aptitude for business had been ten times as great, if Mr. Ferguson had estimated him so highly as to take him as articled clerk, if he had passed all his examinations and been duly admitted, if the brightest possibilities in such a life as his had become realities and he had attained at last to a small share in the business,—what would be the end of this most improbable success? Merely that he would have to spend his whole life in Brenthill absorbed in law. Now, the law was a weariness to him, and he loathed Brenthill. Yet he had voluntarily accepted a life which could offer him no higher prize than such a fate as this, when Godfrey Hammond or Mrs. Middleton, or even old Hardwicke, would no doubt have helped him to something better.

Certainly he had been a fool; and yet, while he realized this truth, he sincerely respected—I might almost say he admired—his own folly. He had been sick of dependence, and he had gone down at once to the bottom of everything, taken his stand on firm ground and conquered independence for himself. He had gained the precious knowledge that he could earn his own living by the labor of his hands. He might have been a fool to reject the help that would have opened some higher and less distasteful career to him, yet if he had accepted it he would never have known the extent of his own powers. He would have been a hermit-crab still, fitted with another shell by the kindness of his friends. Had he clearly understood what he was doing when he went to Brenthill, it was very likely that he might never have gone. He was almost glad that he had not understood.

And now, having conquered in the race, could he go back and ask for the help which he had once refused? Hard-

ly. The life in which we first gain independence may be stern and ugly, the independence itself—when we gather in our harvest—may have a rough and bitter taste, yet it will spoil the palate for all other flavors. They will seem sickly sweet after its wholesome austerity. Neither did Percival feel any greater desire for a career of any kind than he had felt a year earlier when he talked over his future life with Godfrey Hammond. If he were asked what was his day-dream, his castle in the air, the utmost limit of his earthly wishes, he would answer now as he would have answered then, "Brackenhill," dismissing the impossible idea with a smile even as he uttered it. Asked what would content him—since we can hardly hope to draw the highest prize in our life's lottery—he would answer now as then—to have an assured income sufficient to allow him to wander on the Continent, to see pictures, old towns, Alps, rivers, blue sky; wandering, to remain a foreigner all his life, so that there might always be something a little novel and curious about his food and his manner of living (things which are apt to grow so hideously commonplace in the land where one is born), to drink the wine of the country, to read many poems in verse, in prose, in the scenery around; and through it all, from first to last, to "dream deliciously."

And yet, even while he felt that his desire was unchanged, he knew that there was a fresh obstacle between him and its fulfilment. Heaven help him! had there not been enough before? Was it needful that it should become clear to him that nowhere on earth could he find the warmth and the sunlight for which he pined while a certain pair of sad eyes grew ever sadder and sadder looking out on the murky sky, the smoke, the dust, the busy industry of Brenthill? How could he go away? Even these quiet walks of his had pain mixed with their pleasure when he thought that there was no such liberty for Judith Lisle. Not for her the cowslips in the upland pastures, the hawthorn in the hedges, the elm-boughs high against the breezy sky, the first dog-roses pink upon the briers. Percival turned from

them to look at the cloud which hung ever like a dingy smear above Brenthill, and the more he felt their loveliness the more he felt her loss.

He had no walk on Sunday mornings. A few months earlier Mr. Clifton of St. Sylvester's would have claimed him as a convert. Now he was equally devout, but it was the evangelical minister, Mr. Bradbury of Christ Church, who saw him week after week a regular attendant, undaunted and sleepless though the sermon should be divided into seven heads. Mr. Bradbury preached terribly, in a voice which sometimes died mournfully away or hissed in a melodramatic whisper, and then rose suddenly in a threatening cry. Miss Macgregor sat in front of a gallery and looked down on the top of her pastor's head. The double row of little boys who were marshalled at her side grew drowsy in the hot weather, blinked feebly as the discourse progressed, and nodded at the congregation. Now and then Mr. Bradbury, who was only, as it were, at arm's length, turned a little, looked up and flung a red-hot denunciation into the front seats of the gallery. The little boys woke up, heard what was most likely in store for them on the last day, and sat with eyes wide open dismally surveying the prospect. But presently the next boy fidgeted, or a spider let himself down from the roof, or a bird flew past the window, or a slanting ray of sunlight revealed a multitude of dusty dancing motes, and the little lads forgot Mr. Bradbury, who had forgotten them and was busy with somebody else. It might be with the pope: Mr. Bradbury was fond of providing for the pope. Or perhaps he was wasting his energy on Percival Thorne, who sat with his head thrown back and his upward glance just missing the preacher, and was quite undisturbed by his appeals.

Judith Lisle had accepted the offer of a situation at Miss Macgregor's with the expectation of being worked to death, only hoping, as she told Mrs. Barton, that the process would be slow. The hope would not have been at all an unreasonable one if she had undertaken her task in the days when she had Bertie to work for. She

could have lived through much when she lived for Bertie. But, losing her brother, the mainspring of her life seemed broken. One would have said that she had leaned on him, not he on her, she drooped so pitifully now he was gone. Even Miss Macgregor noticed that Miss Lisle was delicate, and expressed her strong disapprobation of such a state of affairs. Mrs. Barton thought Judith looking very far from well, suggested tonics, and began to consider whether she might ask her to go to them for her summer holidays. But to Percival's eyes there was a change from week to week, and he watched her with terror in his heart. Judith had grown curiously younger during the last few months. There had been something of a mother's tenderness in her love for Bertie, which made her appear more than her real age and gave decision and stateliness to her manner. Now that she was alone, she was only a girl, silent and shrinking, needing all her strength to suffer and hide her sorrow. Percival knew that each Sunday, as soon as she had taken her place, she would look downward to the pew where he always sat to ascertain if he were there. For a moment he would meet that quiet gaze, lucid, uncomplaining, but very sad. Then her eyes would be turned to her book or to the little boys who sat near her, or it might even be to Mr. Bradbury. The long service would begin, go on, come to an end. But before she left her place her glance would meet his once more, as if in gentle farewell until another Sunday should come round. Percival would not for worlds have failed at that trysting-place, but he cursed his helplessness. Could he do nothing for Judith but cheer her through Mr. Bradbury's sermons?

About this time he used deliberately to indulge in an impossible fancy. His imagination dwelt on their two lives, cramped, dwarfed and fettered. He had lost his freedom, but it seemed to him that Judith, burdened once with riches, and later with poverty, never had been free. He looked forward, and saw nothing in the future but a struggle for existence which might be prolonged through years

of labor and sordid care. Why were they bound to endure this? Why could they not give up all for just a few days of happiness? Percival longed intensely for a glimpse of beauty, for a little space of warmth and love, of wealth and liberty. Let their life thus blossom together into joy, and he would be content that it should be, like the flowering of the aloe, followed by swift and inevitable death. Only let the death be shared like the life! It would be bitter and terrible to be struck down in their gladness, but if they had truly lived they might be satisfied to die. Percival used to fancy what they might do in one glorious, golden, sunlit week, brilliant against a black background of death. How free they would be to spend all they possessed without a thought for the future! Nothing could pall upon them, and he pictured to himself how every sense would be quickened, how passion would gather strength and tenderness, during those brief days, and rise to its noblest height to meet the end. His imagination revelled in the minute details of the picture, adding one by one a thousand touches of beauty and joy till the dream was lifelike in its loveliness. He could pass in a moment from his commonplace world to this enchanted life with Judith. Living alone, and half starving himself in the attempt to pay his debts, he was in a fit state to see visions and dream dreams. But they only made his present life more distasteful to him, and the more he dreamed of Judith the more he felt that he had nothing to offer her.

He was summoned abruptly from his fairyland one night by the arrival of Mrs. Bryant. She made her appearance rather suddenly, and sat down on a chair by the door to have a little chat with her lodger. "I came back this afternoon," she said. "I didn't tell Lydia: where was the use of bothering about writing to her? Besides, I could just have a look round, and see how Emma 'd done the work while I was away, and how things had gone on altogether." She nodded her rusty black cap confidentially at Percival. It was sprinkled with bugles, which caught the light of his solitary candle.

"I hope you found all right," he said.

"Pretty well," Mrs. Bryant allowed.

"It's a mercy when there's no illness nor anything of that kind, though, if you'll excuse my saying it, Mr. Thorne, you ain't looking as well yourself as I should have liked to see you."

"Oh, I am all right, thank you," said Percival.

Mrs. Bryant shook her head. The different movement brought out quite a different effect of glancing bugles. "Young people should be careful of their health," was her profound remark.

"I assure you there's nothing the matter with me."

"Well, well! we'll hope not," she answered, "though you certainly do look altered, Mr. Thorne, through being thinner in the face and darker under the eyes."

Percival smiled impatiently.

"What was I saying?" Mrs. Bryant continued. "Oh yes—that there was a many mercies to be thankful for. To find the house all right, and the times and times I've dreamed of fire and the engines not to be had, and woke up shaking so as you'd hardly believe it! And I don't really think that I've gone to bed hardly one night without wondering whether Lydia had fastened the door and the little window into the yard, which is not safe if left open. As regular as clockwork, when the time came round, I'd mention it to my sister."

Percival sighed briefly, probably pitying the sister. "I think Miss Bryant has been very careful in fastening everything," he said.

"Well, it does seem so, and very thankful I am. And as I always say when I go out, 'Waste I *must* expect, and waste I *do* expect,' but it's a mercy when there's no thieving."

"Things will hardly go on quite the same when you are not here to look after them, Mrs. Bryant."

"No: how should they?" the landlady acquiesced. "Young heads ain't like old ones, as I said one evening to my sister when Smith was by. 'Young heads ain't like old ones,' said I. 'Why, no,' said Smith: 'they're a deal prettier.' I told

him he ought to have done thinking of such things. And so he ought—a man of his age! But that's what the young men mostly think of, ain't it, Mr. Thorne? Though it's the old heads make the best housekeepers, I think, when there's a lot of lodgers to look after."

"Very likely," said Percival.

"I dare say you think there'd be fine times for the young men lodgers if it wasn't for the old heads. And I don't blame you, Mr. Thorne: it's only natural, and what we must expect in growing old. And if anything could make one grow old before one's time, and live two years in one, so to speak, I do think it's letting lodgings."

Percival expressed himself as not surprised to hear it, though very sorry that lodgers were so injurious to her health.

"There's my drawing-room empty now, and two bedrooms," Mrs. Bryant continued. "Not but what I've had an offer for it this very afternoon, since coming back. But it doesn't do to be too hasty. Respectable parties who pay regular," she nodded a little at Percival as if to point the compliment, "are the parties for me."

"Of course," he said.

"A queer business that of young Mr. Lisle's, wasn't it?" she went on. "I should say it was about time that Miss Crawford did shut up, if she couldn't manage her young ladies better. I sent my Lydia to a boarding-school once, but it was one of a different kind to that. Pretty goings on there were at Standon Square, I'll be bound, if we only knew the truth. But as far as this goes there ain't no great harm done, that I can see. He hasn't done badly for himself, and I dare say they'll be very comfortable. She might have picked a worse—I will say that—for he was always a pleasant-spoken young gentleman, and good-looking too, though that's not a thing to set much store by. And they do say he had seen better times."

She paused. Percival murmured something which was quite unintelligible, but it served to start her off again, apparently under the impression that she had heard a remark of some kind.

"Yes, I suppose so. And as I was saying to Lydia— The coolness of them both! banns and all regular! But there now! I'm talking and talking, forgetting that you were in the thick of it. You knew all about it, I've no doubt, and finely you and he must have laughed in your sleeves—"

"I knew nothing about it, Mrs. Bryant—nothing."

Mrs. Bryant smiled cunningly and nodded at him again. But it was an oblique nod this time, and there was a sidelong look to match it. Percival felt as if he were suffering from an aggravated form of nightmare.

"No, no: I dare say you didn't. At any rate, you won't let out if you did: why should you? It's a great thing to hold one's tongue, Mr. Thorne; and I ought to know, for I've found the advantage of being naturally a silent woman. And I don't say but what you are wise."

"I knew nothing," he repeated doggedly.

"Well, I don't suppose it was any the worse for anybody who *did* know," said Mrs. Bryant. "And though, of course, Miss Lisle lost her situation through it, I dare say she finds it quite made up to her."

"Not at all," said Percival shortly. The conversation was becoming intolerable.

"Oh, you may depend upon it she does," said Mrs. Bryant. "How should a gentleman like you know all the ins and outs, Mr. Thorne? It makes all the difference to a young woman having a brother well-to-do in the world. And very fond of her he always seemed to be, as I was remarking to Lydia."

Percival felt as if his blood were on fire. He dared not profess too intimate a knowledge of Judith's feelings and position, and he could not listen in silence. "I think you are mistaken, Mrs. Bryant," he said, in a tone which would have betrayed his angry disgust to any more sensitive ear. Even his landlady perceived that the subject was not a welcome one.

"Well, well!" she said. "It doesn't

matter, and I'll only wish you as good luck as Mr. Lisle; for I'm sure you deserve a young lady with a little bit of money as well as he did; and no reason why you shouldn't look to find one, one of these fine days."

"No, Mrs. Bryant, I sha'n't copy Mr. Lisle."

"Ah, you've something else in your eye, I can see, and perhaps one might make a guess as to a name. Well, people must manage those things their own way, and interfering mostly does harm, I take it. And I'll wish you luck, anyhow."

"I don't think there's any occasion for your good wishes," said Percival. "Thank you all the same."

"Not but what I'm sorry to lose Mr. and Miss Lisle," Mrs. Bryant continued, as if that were the natural end of her previous sentence, "for they paid for everything most regular."

"I hope these people who want to come may do the same," said Percival. Though he knew that he ran the risk of hearing all that Mrs. Bryant could tell him about their condition and prospects, he felt he could endure anything that would turn the conversation from the Lises and himself.

But there was a different train of ideas in Mrs. Bryant's mind. "And, by the way," she said, "I think we've some little accounts to settle together, Mr. Thorne." Then Percival perceived, for the first time, that she held a folded bit of paper in her hand. The moment that he feared had come. He rose without a word, went to his desk and unlocked it. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Mrs. Bryant had approached the table, had opened the paper and was flattening it out with her hand. He stooped over his hoard—a meagre little hoard this time—counting what he had to give her.

Mrs. Bryant began to hunt in her purse for a receipt stamp. "It's a pleasure to have to do with a gentleman who is always so regular," she said with an approving smile.

Percival, who was steadying a little pile of coin on the sloping desk, felt a

strong desire to tell her the state of affairs while he stooped in the shadow with his face turned away. Precisely because he felt this desire he drew himself up to his full height, walked to the table, looked straight into her eyes and said, "Not so very regular this time, Mrs. Bryant."

She stepped back with a perplexed and questioning expression, but she understood that something was wrong, and the worn face fell suddenly, deepening a multitude of melancholy wrinkles. He laid the money before her: "That's just half of what I owe you: I think you'll find I have counted it all right."

"Half? But where's the other half, Mr. Thorne?"

"Well, I must earn the other half, Mrs. Bryant. You shall have it as soon as I get it."

She looked up at him. "You've got to earn it?" she repeated. Her tone would have been more appropriate if Percival had said he must steal it. There was a pause: Mrs. Bryant's lean hand closed over the money. "I don't understand this, Mr. Thorne—I don't understand it at all."

"It is very simple," he replied. "According to your wishes, I kept the rent for you, but during your absence there was a sudden call upon me for money, and I could not refuse to advance it. I regret it exceedingly if it puts you to inconvenience. I had hoped to have made it all right before you returned, but I have not had time. I can only promise you that you shall be paid all that I can put by each week till I have cleared off my debt."

"Oh, that's all very fine," said Mrs. Bryant. "But I don't think much of promises."

"I'm sorry to hear it," he answered gravely.

She looked hard at him, and said: "I did think you were quite the gentleman, Mr. Thorne. I didn't think you'd have served me so."

"No," said Percival. "I assure you I'm very sorry. If I could explain the whole affair to you, you would see that I am not to blame. But, unluckily, I can't."

"Oh, I don't want any explanations:

I wouldn't give a thank-you for a cart-load of 'em. Nobody ever is to blame who has the explaining of a thing, if it's ever so rascally a job."

"I am very sorry," he repeated. "But I can only say that you shall be paid."

"Oh, I dare say! Look here, Mr. Thorne: I've heard that sort of thing scores of times. There's always been a sudden call for money; it's always something that never happened before, and it isn't ever to happen again; and it's always going to be paid back at once, but there's not one in a hundred who does pay it. Once you begin that sort of thing—"

"You'll find me that hundredth one," said Percival.

"Oh yes. To hear them talk you'd say each one was one in a thousand, at least. But I'd like you to know that though I'm a widow woman I'm not to be robbed and put upon."

"Mrs. Bryant"—Percival's strong voice silenced her querulous tones—"no one wants to rob you. Please to remember that it was entirely of your own free-will that you trusted me with the money."

"More fool I!" Mrs. Bryant ejaculated.

"It was to oblige you that I took charge of it."

"And a pretty mess I've made of it! It had better have gone so as to be some pleasure to my own flesh and blood, instead of your spending it in some way you're ashamed to own."

"If you had been here to receive it, it would have been ready for you," Percival went on, ignoring her last speech. "As it is, it has waited all these weeks for you. It isn't unreasonable that it should wait a little longer for me."

She muttered something to the effect that there was justice to be had, though he didn't seem to think it.

"Oh yes," he said, resting his arm on the chimney-piece, "there's the county court or something of that kind. By all means go to the county court if you like. But I see no occasion for discussing the matter any more beforehand."

His calmness had its effect upon her. She didn't want any unpleasantness, she said.

"Neither do I," he replied: "I do not see why there need be any. If I live you will be paid, and that before very long. If I should happen to die first, I have a friend who will settle my affairs for me, and you will be no loser."

Mrs. Bryant suggested that it might be pleasanter for all parties if Mr. Thorne were to apply to his friend at once. She thought very likely there were little bills about in the town—gentlemen very often had little bills—and if there were any difficulties—gentlemen so often got into difficulties—it was so much better to have things settled and make a fresh start. She had no doubt that Mr. Lisle would be very willing.

"Mr. Lisle!" Percival exclaimed. "Do you suppose for one moment I should ask Mr. Lisle?"

Startled at his vehemence, Mrs. Bryant begged pardon, and substituted "the gentleman" for "Mr. Lisle."

"Thank you, no," said Percival. "I prefer to manage my own affairs in my own way. If I live I will not apply to any one. But if I must go to my grave owing five or six weeks' rent to one or other of you, I assure you most solemnly, Mrs. Bryant, that I will owe it to my friend."

The storm had subsided into subdued grumblings. Their purport was, apparently, that Mrs. Bryant liked lodgers who paid regular, and as for those who didn't, they would have to leave, and she wished them to know it.

"Does that mean that you wish me to go?" the young man demanded with the readiness which was too much for his landlady. "I'll go to-night if you like. Do you wish it?" There was an air of such promptitude about him as he spoke that Mrs. Bryant half expected to see him vanish then and there. She had by no means made up her mind that she did wish to lose a lodger who had been so entirely satisfactory up to that time. And she preferred to keep her debtor within reach; so she drew back a little and qualified what she had said.

"Very well," said Percival, "just as you please."

Mrs. Bryant only hoped it wouldn't

occur again. The tempest of her wrath showed fearful symptoms of dissolving in a shower of tears. "You don't know what work I have to make both ends meet, Mr. Thorne," she said, "nor how hard it is to get one's own, let alone keeping it. I do assure you, Mr. Thorne, me and Lydia might go in silks every day of our lives, and needn't so much as soil our fingers with the work of the house, if we had all we rightly should have. But there are folks who call themselves honest who don't think any harm of taking a widow woman's rooms and getting behindhand with the rent, running up an account for milk and vegetables and the like by the week together; and there's the bell ringing all day, as you may say, with the bills coming in, and one's almost driven out of one's wits with the worry of it all, let alone the loss, which is hard to bear. Oh, I do hope, Mr. Thorne, that it won't occur again!"

"It isn't very likely," said Percival, privately thinking that suicide would be preferable to an existence in which such interviews with his landlady should be of frequent occurrence. Pity, irritation, disgust, pride and humiliation made up a state of feeling which was overshadowed by a horrible fear that Mrs. Bryant would begin to weep before he could get rid of her. He watched her with ever-increasing uneasiness while she attempted to give him a receipt for the money he had paid. She began by wiping her spectacles, but her hand trembled so much that she let them fall, and she, Percival and the candle were all on the floor together, assisting one another in the search for them. The rusty cap was perilously near the flame more than once, which was a cause of fresh anxiety on his part. And when she was once more established at the table, writing a word or two and then wiping her eyes, it was distracting to discover that the receipt-stamp, which Mrs. Bryant had brought with her, and which she was certain she had laid on the table, had mysteriously disappeared. It seemed to Percival that he spent at least a quarter of an hour hunting for that stamp. In reality about two minutes elapsed before it was found sticking to

Mrs. Bryant's damp pocket handkerchief. It was removed thence with great care, clinging to her fingers by the way, after which it showed a not unnatural disinclination to adhere to the paper. But even that difficulty was at last overcome: a shaky signature and a date were laboriously penned, and Percival's heart beat high as he received the completed document.

And then— Mrs. Bryant laid down the pen, took off her spectacles, shook her pocket handkerchief and deliberately burst into tears.

Percival was in despair. Of course he knew perfectly well that he was not a heartless brute, but equally of course he felt that he must be a heartless brute as he stood by while Mrs. Bryant wept copiously. Of course he begged her to calm herself, and of course a long-drawn sob was her only answer. All at once there was a knock at the door. "Come in," said Percival, feeling that matters could not possibly be worse. It opened, and Lydia stood on the threshold, staring at the pair in much surprise.

"Well, I never!" she said; and turning toward Percival she eyed him suspiciously, as if she thought he might have been knocking the old lady about. "And pray what may be the meaning of this?"

"Mrs. Bryant isn't quite herself this evening, I am afraid," said Percival, feeling that his reply was very feeble. "And we have had a little business to settle which was not quite satisfactory."

At the word "business" Lydia stepped forward, and her surprise gave place to an expression of half incredulous amusement—Percival would almost have said of delight.

"What! ain't the money all right?" she said. "You don't say so! Well, ma, you *have* been clever this time, haven't you? Oh I suppose you thought I didn't know what you were after when you were so careful about not bothering me with the accounts? Lor! I knew fast enough. Don't you feel proud of yourself for having managed it so well?"

Mrs. Bryant wept. Percival, not hav-

ing a word to say, preserved a dignified silence.

"Come along, ma: I dare say Mr. Thorne has had about enough of this," Lydia went on, coolly examining the paper which lay on the table. She arrived at the total. "Oh that's it, is it? Well, I like that, I do! Some people are so clever, ain't they? So wonderfully sharp they can't trust their own belongings! I do like that! Come along, ma." And Lydia seconded her summons with such energetic action that it seemed to Percival that she absolutely swept the old lady out of the room, and that the wet handkerchief, the rusty black gown and the bugle-sprinkled head-dress vanished in a whirlwind, with a sound of shrill laughter on the stairs.

For a moment his heart leapt with a sudden sense of relief and freedom, but only for a moment. Then he flung himself into his arm-chair, utterly dejected and sickened.

Should he be subject to this kind of thing all his life long? If he should chance to be ill and unable to work, how could he live for any length of time on his paltry savings? And debt would mean *this*! He need not even be ill. He remembered how he broke his arm once when he was a lad. Suppose he broke his arm now—a bit of orange-peel in the street might do it—or suppose he hurt the hand with which he wrote?

And this was the life which he might ask Judith to share with him! She might endure Mrs. Bryant's scolding and Lydia's laughter, and pinch and save as he was forced to do, and grow weary and careworn and sick at heart. No, God forbid! And yet—and yet—was she not enduring as bad or worse in that hateful school?

Oh for his dream! One week of life and love, and then swift exit from a hideous world, where Mrs. Bryant and Miss Macgregor and Lydia and all his other nightmares might do their worst and fight their hardest in their ugly struggle for existence!

Percival had achieved something of a victory in his encounter with his landlady. His manner had been calm and

fairly easy, and from first to last she had been more conscious of his calmness than Percival was himself. She had been silenced, not coaxed and flattered as she often was by unfortunate lodgers whose ready money ran short. Indeed, she had been defied, and when she recovered herself a little she declared that she had never seen any one so stuck up as Mr. Thorne. This was unkind, after he had gone down on his knees to look for her spectacles.

But if Percival had conquered, his was but a barren victory. He fancied that an unwonted tone of deference crept into his voice when he gave his orders. He was afraid of Mrs. Bryant. He faced Lydia bravely, but he winced in secret at the recollection of her laughter. He very nearly starved himself lest mother or daughter should be able to say, "Mr. Thorne might have remembered his debts before he ordered this or that." He had paid Lisle's bill at Mr. Robinson's, but he could not forget his own, and he walked past the house daily with his head high, feeling himself a miserable coward.

There was a draper's shop close to it, and as he went by one day he saw a little pony chaise at the door. A girl of twelve or thirteen sat in it listlessly holding the reins and looking up and down the street. It was a great field-day for the Brenthill volunteers, and their band came round a corner not a dozen yards away and suddenly struck up a triumphant march. The pony, although as quiet a little creature as you could easily find, was startled. If it had been a wooden rocking-horse it might not have minded, but any greater sensibility must have received a shock. The girl uttered a cry of alarm, but there was no cause for it. Percival, who was close at hand, stepped to the pony's head, a lady rushed out of the shop, the band went by in a tempest of martial music, a crowd of boys and girls filled the roadway and disappeared as quickly as they came. It was all over in a minute. Percival, who was coaxing the pony as he stood, was warmly thanked.

"There is nothing to thank me for,"

he said. "That band was enough to frighten anything, but the pony seems a gentle little thing."

"So it is," the lady replied. "But you see, the driver was very inexperienced, and we really are very much obliged to you, Mr. Thorne."

He looked at her in blank amazement. Had some one from his former life suddenly arisen to claim acquaintance with him? He glanced from her to the girl, but recognized neither. "You know me?" he said.

She smiled: "You don't know me, I dare say. I am Mrs. Barton. I saw you one day when I was just coming away after calling on Miss Lisle." She watched the hero of her romance as she spoke. His dark face lighted up suddenly.

"I have often heard Miss Lisle speak of you and of your kindness," he said. "Do you ever see her now?"

"Oh yes. She comes to give Janie her music-lesson every Wednesday afternoon.—We couldn't do without Miss Lisle, could we, Janie?" The girl was shy and did not speak, but a broad smile overspread her face.

"I had no idea she still came to you. Do you know how she gets on at Miss Macgregor's?" he asked eagerly. "Is she well? I saw her at church one day, and I thought she was pale."

"She says she is well," Mrs. Barton replied. "But I am not very fond of Miss Macgregor myself: no one ever stays there very long." A shopman came out and put a parcel into the chaise. Mrs. Barton took the reins. "I shall tell Miss Lisle you asked after her," she said as with a bow and cordial smile she drove off.

It was Monday, and Percival's mind was speedily made up. He would see Judith Lisle on Wednesday.

Tuesday was a remarkably long day, but Wednesday came at last, and he obtained permission to leave the office earlier than usual. He knew the street in which Mrs. Barton lived, and had taken some trouble to ascertain the number, so that he could stroll to and fro at a safe distance, commanding a view of the door.

He had time to study the contents of a milliner's window: it was the only shop near at hand, and even that pretended not to be a shop, but rather a private house, where some one had accidentally left a bonnet or two, a few sprays of artificial flowers and an old lady's cap in the front room. He had abundant leisure to watch No. 51 taking in a supply of coals, and No. 63 sending away a piano. He sauntered to and fro so long, with a careless assumption of unconsciousness how time was passing, that a stupid young policeman perceived that he was not an ordinary passer-by. Astonished and delighted at his own penetration, he began to saunter and watch him, trying to make out which house he intended to favor with a midnight visit. Percival saw quite a procession of babies in perambulators being wheeled home by their nurses after their afternoon airing, and he discovered that the nurse at No. 57 had a flirtation with a soldier. But at last the door of No. 69 opened, a slim figure came down the steps, and he started to meet it, leisurely, but with a sudden decision and purpose in his walk. The young policeman saw the meeting: the whole affair became clear to him—why, he had done that sort of thing himself—and he hurried off rather indignantly, feeling that he had wasted his time, and that the supposed burglar had not behaved at all handsomely.

And Percival went forward and held out his hand to Judith, but found that even the most commonplace greeting stuck in his throat somehow. She looked quickly up at him, but she too was silent, and he walked a few steps by her side before he said, "I did not know what day you were going away."

The rest of the conversation followed in a swift interchange of question and reply, as if to make up for that pause.

"No, but I thought I should be sure to have a chance of saying good-bye."

"And I was out. I was very sorry when I came home and found that you were gone. But since we have met again, it doesn't matter now, does it?" he said with a smile. "How do you get on at Miss Macgregor's?"

"Oh, very well," she answered. "It will do for the present."

"And Miss Crawford?"

"She will not see me nor hear from me. She is ill and low-spirited, and Mrs. Barton tells me that a niece has come to look after her."

"Isn't that rather a good thing?"

"No: I don't like it. I saw one or two of those nieces—there are seven of them—great vulgar, managing women. I can't bear to think of my dear little Miss Crawford being bullied and nursed by Miss Price. She couldn't endure them, I know, only she was so fond of their mother."

Percival changed the subject: "So you go to Mrs. Barton's still? I didn't know that till last Monday."

"When you rescued Janie from imminent peril. Oh, I have heard," said Judith with a smile.

"Please to describe me as risking my own life in the act. It would be a pity not to make me heroic while you are about it."

"Janie would readily believe it. She measures her danger by her terror, which was great. But she is a dear, good child, and it is such a pleasure to me to go there every week!"

"Ah! Then you are not happy at Miss Macgregor's?"

"Well, not very. But it might be much worse. And I am mercenary enough to think about the money I earn at Mrs. Barton's," said Judith. "I don't mind telling you now that Bertie left two or three little bills unpaid when he went away, and I was very anxious about them. But, luckily, they were small."

"You don't mind telling me now. Are they paid, then?"

"Yes, and I have not heard of any more."

"You paid them out of your earnings?"

"Yes. You understand me, don't you, Mr. Thorne? Bertie and I were together then, and I could not take Emmeline's money to pay our debts."

"Yes, I understand."

"And I had saved a little. It is all right now, since they are all paid. I fancied there would be some more to

come in, but it seems not, so I have a pound or two to spare, and I feel quite rich."

It struck Percival that Judith had managed better than he had. "Do you ever hear from him?" he asked.

"Yes. Mr. Nash has forgiven them."

"Already?"

Judith nodded: "He has, though I thought he never would. Bertie understood him better."

(The truth was, that she had taken impotent rage for strength of purpose. Mr. Nash was aware that he had neglected his daughter, and was anxious to stifle the thought by laying the blame on every one else. And Bertie was quicker than Judith was in reading character when it was on his own level.)

"He has forgiven them," Percival repeated with a smile. "Well, Bertie is a lucky fellow."

"So is my father lucky, if that is luck."

"Your father?"

"Yes. He has written to me and to my aunt Lisle—at Rookleigh, you know. He has taken another name, and it seems he is getting on and making money: *he* wanted to send me some too. And my aunt is angry with me because I would not go to her. She has given me two months to make up my mind in."

"And you will not go?"

"I cannot leave Brenthill," said Judith. "She is more than half inclined to forgive Bertie too. So I am alone; and yet I am right." She uttered the last words with lingering sadness.

"No doubt," Percival answered. They were walking slowly through a quiet back street, with a blank wall on one side. "Still, it is hard," he said.

There was something so simple and tender in his tone that Judith looked up and met his eyes. She might have read his words in them even if he had not spoken. "Don't pity me, Mr. Thorne," she said.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because— I hardly know why. I can't stand it when any one is kind to me, or sorry for me, sometimes at Mrs. Barton's. I don't know how to bear it. But it does not matter much, for I get

braver and braver when people are hard and cold. I really don't mind that half as much as you would think, so you see you needn't pity me. In fact, you mustn't."

"Indeed, I think I must," said Percival. "More than before."

"No, no," she answered, hurriedly. "Don't say it, don't look it, don't even let me think you do it in your heart. Tell me about yourself. You listen to me, you ask about me, but you say nothing of what you are doing."

"Working." There was a moment's hesitation. "And dreaming," he added.

"But you have been ill?"

"Not I."

"You have not been ill? Then you are ill. What makes you so pale?"

He laughed: "Am I pale?"

"And you look tired."

"My work is wearisome sometimes."

"More so than it was?" she questioned anxiously. "You used not to look so tired."

"Don't you think that a wearisome thing must grow more wearisome merely by going on?"

"But is that all? Isn't there anything else the matter?"

"Perhaps there is," he allowed. "There are little worries of course, but shall I tell you what is the great thing that is the matter with me?"

"If you will."

"I miss you, Judith."

The color spread over her face like a rosy dawn. Her eyes were fixed on the pavement, and yet they looked as if they caught a glimpse of Eden. But Percival could not see that. "You miss me?" she said.

"Yes." He had forgotten his hesitation and despair. He had outstripped them, had left them far behind, and his words sprang to his lips with a glad sense of victory and freedom. "Must I miss you always?" he said. "Will you not come back to me, Judith? My work could never be wearisome then when I should feel that I was working for you. There would be long to wait, no doubt, and then a hard life, a poor home. What have I to offer you? But will you come?"

She looked up at him: "Do you really want me, or is it that you are sorry for me and want to help me? Are you sure it isn't that? We Lises have done you harm enough: I won't do you a worse wrong still."

"You will do me the worst wrong of all if you let such fears and fancies stand between you and me," said Percival. "Do you not know that I love you? You must decide as your own heart tells you. But don't doubt me."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm: "Forgive me, Percival."

And so those two passed together into the Eden which she had seen.

CHAPTER XLIX.

HOW THE SUN ROSE IN GLADNESS, AND SET IN THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

THE Wednesday which was so white a day for Judith and Percival had dawned brightly at Fordborough. Sissy, opening her eyes on the radiant beauty of the morning, sprang up with an exclamation of delight. The preceding day had been gray and uncertain, but this was golden and cloudless. A light breeze tossed the acacia-boughs and showed flashes of blue between the quivering sprays. The dew was still hanging on the clustered white roses which climbed to her open window, and the birds were singing among the leaves as if they were running races in a headlong rapture of delight. Sissy did not sing, but she said to herself, "Oh, how glad the Latimers must be!"

She was right, for at a still earlier hour the Latimer girls had been flying in and out of their respective rooms in a perfectly aimless, joyous, childish happy fashion, like a flock of white pigeons. And the sum of their conversation was simply this: "Oh, what a day! what a glorious day!" Yet it sufficed for a Babel of bird-like voices. At last one more energetic than the rest, in her white dressing-gown and with her hair hanging loose, flew down the long oak-panelled corridor and knocked with might and main at her brother's door: "Walter! Walter! wake

up! do! You said it would rain, and it doesn't rain! It is a *lovely* morning! Oh, Walter!"

Walter responded briefly to the effect that he had been awake since half after three, and was aware of the fact.

Henry Hardwicke, who had been to the river for an early swim, stopped to discuss the weather with a laborer who was plodding across the fields. The old man looked at the blue sky with an air of unutterable wisdom, made some profound remarks about the quarter in which the wind was, added a local saying or two bearing on the case, and summed up to the effect that it was a fine day.

Captain Fothergill had no particular view from his window, but he inquired at an early hour what the weather was like.

Ashendale Priory was a fine old ruin belonging to the Latimers, and about six miles from Latimer's Court. Sissy Langton had said one day that she often passed it in her rides, but had never been into it. Walter Latimer was astonished, horrified and delighted all at once, and vowed that she must see it, and should see it without delay. This Wednesday had been fixed for an excursion there, but the project was nearly given up on account of the weather. As late as the previous afternoon the question was seriously debated at the Court by a council composed of Walter and three of his sisters. One of the members was sent to look at the barometer. She reported that it had gone up in the most extraordinary manner since luncheon.

The announcement was greeted with delight, but it was discovered late that evening that Miss Latimer had had a happy thought. Fearing that the barometer would be utterly ruined by the shaking and tapping which it underwent, she had screwed it up to a height at which her younger brothers and sisters could not wish to disturb it, had gone into the village, and had forgotten all about it. There was general dismay and much laughter.

"It will rain," said Walter: "it will certainly rain. I thought it was very queer. Well, it is too late to do any-

thing now. We must just wait and see what happens."

And behold the morrow had come, the clouds were gone, and it was a day in a thousand, a very queen of days.

The party started for Ashendale, some riding, some driving, waking the quiet green lanes with a happy tumult of wheels and horse-hoofs and laughing voices. Captain Fothergill contrived to be near Miss Langton, and to talk in a fashion which made her look down once or twice when she had encountered the eagerness of his dark eyes. The words he said might have been published by the town-crier. But that functionary could not have reproduced the tone and manner which rendered them significant, though Sissy hardly knew the precise amount of meaning they were intended to convey. She was glad when the tower of the priory rose above the trees. So was Walter Latimer, who had been eying the back of Fothergill's head or the sharply-cut profile which was turned so frequently toward Miss Langton, and who was firmly persuaded that the captain ought to be shot.

Ashendale Priory was built nearly at the bottom of a hill. Part of it, close by the gateway, was a farmhouse occupied by a tenant of the Latimers. His wife, a pleasant middle-aged woman, came out to meet them as they dismounted, and a rosy daughter of sixteen or seventeen lingered shyly in the little garden, which was full to overflowing of old-fashioned flowers and humming with multitudes of bees. The hot sweet fragrance of the crowded borders made Sissy say that it was like the very heart of summer-time.

"A place to recollect and dream of on a November day," said Fothergill.

"Oh, don't talk of November now! I hate it."

"I don't want November, I assure you," he replied. "Why cannot this last for ever?"

"The weather?"

"Much more than the weather. Do you suppose I should only remember that it was a fine day?"

"What, the place too?" said Sissy.

"It is beautiful, but I think you would soon get tired of Ashendale, Captain Fothergill."

"Do you?" he said in a low voice, looking at her with the eyes which seemed to draw hers to meet them. "Try me and see which will be tired first." And, without giving her time to answer, he went on: "Couldn't you be content with Ashendale?"

"For always? I don't think I could—not for all my life."

"Well, then, the perfect place is yet to find," said Fothergill. "And how charming it must be!"

"If one should ever find it!" said Sissy.

"One?" Fothergill looked at her again. "Not *one*! Won't you hope we may both find it?"

"Like the people who hunted for the Earthly Paradise," said Sissy hurriedly. "Look! they are going to the ruins." And she hastened to join the others.

Latimer noticed that she evidently, and very properly, would not permit Fothergill to monopolize her, but seemed rather to avoid the fellow. To his surprise, however, he found that there was no better fortune for himself. Fothergill had brought a sailor cousin, a boy of nineteen, curly-haired, sunburnt and merry, with a sailor's delight in flirtation and fun, and Archibald Carroll fixed his violent though temporary affections on Sissy the moment he was introduced to her at the priory. To Latimer's great disgust, Sissy distinctly encouraged him, and the two went off together during the progress round the ruins. There were some old fish-ponds to be seen, with swans and reeds and water-lilies, and when they were tired of scrambling about the gray walls there was a little copse hard by, the perfection of sylvan scenery on a small scale. The party speedily dispersed, rambling where their fancy led them, and were seen no more till the hour which had been fixed for dinner. Mrs. Latimer meanwhile chose a space of level turf, superintended the unpacking of hampers, and when the wanderers came dropping in by twos and threes from all points of the compass, professing unbounded readiness to

help in the preparations, there was nothing left for them to do. Among the latest were Sissy and her squire, a radiant pair. She was charmed with her saucy sailor-boy, who had no serious intentions or hopes, who would most likely be gone on the morrow, and who asked nothing more than to be happy with her through that happy summer day. People and things were apt to grow perplexing and sad when they came into her every-day life, but here was a holiday companion, arrived as unexpectedly as if he were created for her holiday, with no such thing as an afterthought about the whole affair.

Latimer sulked, but his rival smiled, when the two young people arrived. For—thus argued Raymond Fothergill, with a vanity which was so calm, so clear, so certain that it sounded like reason itself—it was not possible that Sissy Langton preferred Carroll to himself. Even had it been Latimer or Hardwicke! But Carroll—no! Therefore she used the one cousin merely to avoid the other. But why did she wish to avoid him? He remembered her blushes, her shyness, the eyes that sank before his own, and he answered promptly that she feared him. He triumphed in the thought. He had contended against a gentle indifference on Sissy's part, till, having heard rumors of a bygone love-affair, he had suspected the existence of an unacknowledged constancy. Then what did this fear mean? It was obviously the self-distrust of a heart unwilling to yield, clinging to its old loyalty, yet aware of a new weakness—seeking safety in flight because unable to resist. Fothergill was conscious of power, and could wait with patience. (It would have been unreasonable to expect him to spend an equal amount of time and talent in accounting for Miss Langton's equally evident avoidance of young Latimer. Besides, that was a simple matter. He bored her, no doubt.)

When the business of eating and drinking was drawing to a close, little Edith Latimer, the youngest of the party, began to arrange a lapful of wild flowers which she had brought back from her

ramble. Hardwicke, who had helped her to collect them, handed them to her one by one.

A green tuft which he held up caught Sissy's eye. "Why, Edie, what have you got there?" she said. "Is that maiden-hair spleenwort? Where did you find it?"

"In a crack in the wall: there's a lot more," the child answered; and at the same moment Hardwicke said, "Shall I get you some?"

"No: I'll get some," exclaimed Archie, who was lying at Sissy's feet. "Miss Langton would rather I got it for her, I know."

Sissy arched her brows.

"She has so much more confidence in me," Archie explained. "Please give me a leaf of that stuff, Miss Latimer: I want to see what it's like."

"My confidence is rather misplaced, I'm afraid, if you don't know what you are going to look for."

"Not a bit misplaced. You know very well I shall have a sort of instinct which will take me straight to it."

"Dear me! It hasn't any smell, you know," said Sissy with perfect gravity.

"Oh, how cruel!" said Carroll, "withering up my delicate feelings with thoughtless sarcasm! Smell? no! My what-d'ye-call-it—sympathy—will tell me which it is. My heart will beat faster as I approach it. But I'll have that leaf all the same, please."

"And it might be as well to know where to look for it."

"We found it in the ruins—in the wall of the refectory," said Hardwicke.

Sissy looked doubtful, but Carroll exclaimed, "Oh, I know! That's where the old fellows used to dine, isn't it? And had sermons read to them all the time."

"What a bore!" some one suggested.

"Well, I don't know about that," said Archie. "Sermons always are awful bores, ain't they? But I don't think I should mind 'em so much if I might eat my dinner all the time." He stopped with a comical look of alarm. "I say, we haven't got any parsons here, have we?"

"No," said Fothergill smiling. "We've brought the surgeon, in case of broken

bones, but we've left the chaplain at home. So you may give us the full benefit of your opinions."

"I thought there wasn't one," Archie remarked, looking up at Sissy, "because nobody said grace. Or don't you ever say grace at a picnic?"

"I don't think you do," Sissy replied. "Unless it were a very Low Church picnic perhaps. I don't know, I'm sure."

"Makes a difference being out of doors, I suppose," said Archie, examining the little frond which Edith had given him. "And this is what you call maiden-hair?"

"What should you call it?"

"A libel," he answered promptly. "Maiden-hair, indeed! Why, I can see some a thousand times prettier quite close by. What can you want with this? *You* can't see the other, but I'll tell you what it's like. It's the most beautiful brown, with gold in it, and it grows in little ripples and waves and curls, and nothing ever was half so fine before, and it catches just the edge of a ray of sunshine—oh, don't move your head!—and looks like a golden glory—"

"Dear me!" said Sissy. "Then I'm afraid it's very rough."

"—And the least bit of it is worth a cartload of this green rubbish."

"Ah! But you see it is very much harder to get."

"Of course it is," said Archie. "But exchange is no robbery, they say. Suppose I go and dig up some of this, don't you think—remembering that I am a poor sailor-boy, going to be banished from 'England, home and beauty,' and that I shall most likely be drowned on my next voyage—don't you think—"

"I think that, on your own showing, you must get me at least a cartload of the other before you have the face to finish that sentence."

"A cartload! I feel like a prince in a fairy-tale. And what would you do with it all?"

"Well, I really hardly know what I should do with it."

"There now!" said Archie. "And I could tell you in a moment what I would do with mine if you gave it me."

"Oh, but I could tell you that."

"Tell me, then."

"You would fold it up carefully in a neat little bit of paper, but you would not write anything on it, because you would not like it to look business-like. Besides, you couldn't possibly forget. And a few months hence you will have lost your heart to some foreign young lady—I don't know where you are going—and you would find the little packet in your desk, and wonder who gave it to you."

"Oh, how little you know me!" Archie exclaimed, and sank back on the turf in a despairing attitude. But a moment later he began to laugh, and sat up again. "There *was* a bit once," he said confidentially, "and for the life of me I couldn't think whose it could be. There were two or three girls I knew it couldn't possibly belong to, but that didn't help me very far. That lock of hair quite haunted me. See what it is to have such susceptible feelings! I used to look at it a dozen times a day, and I couldn't sleep at night for thinking of it. At last I said to myself, 'I don't care whose it is: she was a nice, dear girl anyhow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like to think that she bothered me in this way.' So I consigned it to a watery grave. I felt very melancholy when it went, I can tell you, and if my own hair had been a reasonable length I'd have sent a bit of it overboard with hers, just for company's sake. But I'd had a fever, and I was cropped like a convict, so I couldn't."

"You tell that little story very nicely," said Sissy when he paused. "Do you always mention it when you ask—"

"Why, no," Archie exclaimed. "I thought *you* would take it as it was meant—as the greatest possible compliment to yourself. But I suppose it's my destiny to be misunderstood. Don't you see that I *couldn't* tell that to any one unless I were quite sure that she was so much higher, so altogether apart, that she never, never could get mixed up with anybody else in my mind?"

"She had better have some very particular sort of curliness in her hair too," said Sissy. "Don't you think it would be safer?"

"Oh, this is too much!" he exclaimed. "It's sport to you, evidently, but you don't consider that it's death to me. I say, come away, and we'll look for this green stuff."

Fothergill smiled, but Latimer's handsome face flushed. He had made a dozen attempts to supplant Carroll, and had been foiled by the laughing pair. What was the use of being a good-looking fellow of six-and-twenty, head of one of the county families and owner of Latimer's Court and Ashendale, if he were to be set aside by a beggarly sailor-boy? What did Fothergill mean by bringing his poor relations dragging after him where they were not wanted? He sprang to his feet, and went away with long strides to make violent love to the farmer's rosy little daughter. He knew that he meant nothing at all, and that he was filling the poor child's head and heart with the vainest of hopes. He knew that he owed especial respect and consideration to the daughter of his tenant, a man who had dealt faithfully by him, and whose father and grandfather had held Ashendale under the Latimers. He felt that he was acting meanly even while he kissed little Lucy by the red wall where the apricots were ripening in the sun. And he had no overmastering passion for excuse: what did he care for little Lucy? He was doing wrong, and he was doing it *because* it was wrong. He was in a fiercely antagonistic mood, and, as he could not fight Fothergill and Carroll, he fought with his own sense of truth and honor, for want of a better foe. And Lucy, conscious of her rosy prettiness, stood shyly pulling the lavender-heads in a glad bewilderment of vanity, wonder and delight, while Latimer's heart was full of jealous anger. If Sissy Langton could amuse herself, so could he.

But Sissy was too happily absorbed in her amusement to think of his. She had avoided him, as she had avoided Captain Fothergill, from a sense of danger. They were becoming too serious, too much in earnest, and she did not want to be serious. So she went gayly across the grass, laughing at Archie because he would look on level ground for her maiden-hair spleenwort. They came to a small enclosure.

"Here you are!" said Carroll. "This is what somebody said was the refectory. It makes one feel quite sad and sentimental only to think what a lot of jolly dinners have been eaten here. And nothing left of it all!"

"That's your idea of sentiment, Mr. Carroll? It sounds to me as if you hadn't had enough to eat."

"Oh yes, I had plenty. But we ought to pledge each other in a cup of sack, or something of the kind. And a place like this ought at least to smell deliciously of roast and boiled. Instead of which it might as well be the chapel."

Sissy gazed up at the wall: "There's some maiden-hair! How was it I never saw it this morning? Surely, we came along the top and looked down into this place."

"No," said Archie. "That was the chapel we looked into. Didn't I say they were just alike?"

"Well, I can easily get up there," she said. "And you may stay down here if you like, and grow sentimental over the ghost of a dinner." And, laughing, she darted up a steep ascent of turf, slackening her pace when she came to a rough heap of fallen stones. Carroll was by her side directly, helping her. "Why, this is prettier than where we went this morning," she said when they reached the top: "you see the whole place better. But it's narrower, I think. This is the west wall, isn't it? Oh, Mr. Carroll, how much the sun has gone down already!"

"I wish I were Moses, or whoever it was, to make it stop," said the boy: "it would stay up there a good long time."

There was a black belt of shadow at the foot of the wall. Archie looked down as if to measure its breadth. A little tuft of green caught his eye, and stooping he pulled it from between the stones.

"Oh, how broken it is here! Doesn't it look as if a giant had taken a great bite out of it?" Sissy exclaimed, at the same moment that he called after her, "Is this right, Miss Langton?"

She turned her head, and for a second's space he saw her bright face, her

laughing, parted lips. Then there was a terrible cry, stretched hands at which he snatched instinctively but in vain, and a stone which slipped and fell heavily. He stumbled forward, and recovered himself with an effort. There was blank space before him—and what below?

Archie Carroll half scrambled down by the help of the ivy, half slid, and reached the ground. Thus, at the risk of his life, he gained half a minute, and spent it in kneeling on the grass—a yard away from that which he dared not touch—saying pitifully, "Miss Langton! Oh, won't you speak to me, Miss Langton?"

He was in the shadow, but looking across the enclosure he faced a broken doorway in the south-east corner. The ground sloped away a little, and the arch opened into the stainless blue. A sound of footsteps made Carroll look up, and through the archway came Raymond Fothergill. He had heard the cry, he had outrun the rest, and, even in his blank bewilderment of horror, Archie shrank back scared at his cousin's aspect. His brows and moustache were black as night against the unnatural whiteness of his face, which was like bleached wax. His eyes were terrible. He seemed to reach the spot in an instant. Carroll saw his hands on the stone which had fallen, and lay on her—O God!—or only on her dress?

Fothergill's features contracted in sudden agony as he noted the horribly twisted position in which she lay, but he stooped without a moment's hesitation, and, lifting her gently, laid her on the turf, resting her head upon his knee. There was a strange contrast between the tenderness with which he supported her and the fierce anger of his face. Others of the party came rushing on the scene in dismay and horror.

"Water!" said Fothergill. "Where's Anderson?" (Anderson was the young doctor.) "Not here?"

"He went by the fish-ponds with Evelyn," cried Edith suddenly: "I saw him." Hardwicke darted off.

"Curse him! Playing the fool when he's wanted more than he ever will be again.—Mrs. Latimer!"

Edith rushed away to find her mother. Some one brought water, and held it while Fothergill, with his disengaged hand, sprinkled the white face on his knee.

Walter Latimer hurried round the corner. He held a pink rosebud, on which his fingers tightened unconsciously as he ran. Coming to the staring group, he stopped aghast. "Good God!" he panted, "what has happened?"

Fothergill dashed more water on the shut eyes and bright hair.

Latimer looked from him to the others standing round: "What has happened?"

A hoarse voice spoke from the background: "She fell." Archie Carroll had risen from his knees, and, lifting one hand above his head, he pointed to the wall. Suddenly, he met Fothergill's eyes, and with a half-smothered cry he flung himself all along upon the grass and hid his face.

"Fothergill! is she much hurt?" cried Latimer. "Is it serious?"

The other did not look up. "I cannot tell," he said, "but I believe she is killed."

Latimer uttered a cry: "No! no! For God's sake don't say that! It can't be!"

Fothergill made no answer.

"It isn't possible!" said Walter. But his glance measured the height of the wall and rested on the stones scattered thickly below. The words died on his lips.

"Is Anderson never coming?" said some one else. Another messenger hurried off. Latimer stood as if rooted to the ground, gazing after him. All at once he noticed the rose which he still held, and jerked it away with a movement as of horror.

The last runner returned: "Anderson and Hardwicke will be here directly: I saw them coming up the path from the fish-ponds. Here is Mrs. Latimer."

Edith ran through the archway first, eager and breathless. "Here is mamma," she said, going straight to Raymond Fothergill with her tidings, and speaking softly as if Sissy were asleep. A little nod was his only answer, and

the girl stood gazing with frightened eyes at the drooping head which he supported. Mrs. Latimer, Hardwicke and Anderson all arrived together, and



"FOTHERGILL! IS SHE MUCH HURT?"—Page 262.

the group divided to make way for them. The first thing to be done was to carry Sissy to the farmhouse, and while they were arranging this Edith felt two hands

pressed lightly on her shoulders. She turned and confronted Harry Hardwicke.

"Hush!" he said: "do not disturb them now, but when they have taken her to the house, if you hear anything said, tell them that I have gone for Dr. Grey, and as soon as I have sent him here I shall go on for Mrs. Middleton. You understand?" he added, for the child was looking at him with her scared eyes, and had not spoken.

"Yes," she said, "I will tell them. Oh, Harry! will she die?"

"Not if anything you and I can do will save her—will she, Edith?" and Hardwicke ran off to the stables for his horse. A man was there who saddled it for him, and a rough farm-boy stood by and saw how the gentleman, while he waited, stroked the next one—a lady's horse, a chestnut—and how presently he turned his face away and laid his cheek for a moment against the chestnut's neck. The boy thought it was a rum go, and stood staring vacantly while Hardwicke galloped off on his terrible errand.

Meanwhile, they were carrying Sissy to the house. Fothergill was helping, of course. Latimer had stood by irresolutely, half afraid, yet secretly hoping for a word which would call him. But no one heeded him. Evelyn and Edith had hurried on to see that there was a bed on which she could be laid, and the sad little procession followed them at a short distance. The lookers-on straggled after it, an anxiously-whispering group, and as the last passed through the ruined doorway Archie Carroll lifted his head and glanced round. The wall, with its mosses and ivy, rose darkly above him—too terrible a presence to be faced alone. He sprang up, hurried out of the black belt of shadow and fled across the turf. He never looked back till he stood under the arch, but halting there, within sight of his companions, he clasped a projection with one hand as if he were giddy, and turning his head gazed intently at the crest of the wall. Every broken edge, every tuft of feathery grass, every aspiring ivy-spray, stood

sharply out against the sunny blue. The breeze had gone down, and neither blade nor leaf stirred in the hot stillness of the air. There was the way by which they had gone up, there was the ruinous gap which Sissy had said was like a giant's bite. Archie's grasp tightened on the stone as he looked. He might well feel stunned and dizzy, gazing thus across the hideous gulf which parted him from the moment when he stood upon the wall with Sissy Langton laughing by his side. Not till every detail was cruelly stamped upon his brain did he leave the spot.

By that time they had carried Sissy in. Little Lucy had been close by, her rosy face blanched with horror, and had looked appealingly at Latimer as he went past. She wanted a kind word or glance, but the innocent confiding look filled him with remorse and disgust. He would not meet it: he stared straight before him. Lucy was overcome by conflicting emotions, went off into hysterics, and her mother had to be called away from the room where she was helping Mrs. Latimer. Walter felt as if he could have strangled the pretty, foolish child to whom he had been saying sweet things not half an hour before. The rose that he had gathered for her was fastened in her dress, and the pink bud that she had given him lay in its first freshness on the turf in the ruins.

Some of the party waited in the garden. Fothergill stood in the shadow of the porch, silent and a little apart. Archie Carroll came up the path, but no one spoke to him, and he went straight to his cousin. Leaning against the woodwork, he opened his lips to speak, but was obliged to stop and clear his throat, for the words would not come. "How is she?" he said at last.

"I don't know."

"Why do you look at me like that?" said the boy desperately.

Fothergill slightly changed his position, and the light fell more strongly on his face. "I don't ever want to look at you again," he said with quiet emphasis. "You've done mischief enough to last your lifetime if you lived a thousand years."

"It wasn't my fault! Ray, it wasn't!"

"Whose, then?" said Fothergill. "Possibly you think it would have happened if I had been there?"

"They said that wall—" the young fellow began.

"They didn't. No one told you to climb the most ruinous bit of the whole place. And she didn't even know where the refectory was."

Carroll groaned: "Don't, Ray: I can't bear it! I shall kill myself!"

"No, you won't," said Fothergill. "You'll go safe home to your people at the rectory. No more of this."

Archie hesitated, and then miserably dragged himself away. Fothergill retreated a little farther into the porch, and was almost lost in the shadow. No tidings, good or evil, had come from the inner room where Sissy lay, but his state of mind was rather despairing than anxious. From the moment when he ran across the grass and saw her lying, a senseless heap, at the foot of the wall, he had felt assured that she was fatally injured. If he hoped at all it was an unconscious hope—a hope of which he never would be conscious until a cruel certainty killed it.

His dominant feeling was anger. He had cared for this girl—cared for her so much that he had been astonished at himself for so caring—and he felt that this love was the crown of his life. He did not for a moment doubt that he would have won her. He had triumphed in anticipation, but Death had stepped between them and baffled him, and now it was all over. Fothergill was as furious with Death as if it had been a rival who robbed him. He felt himself the sport of a power to which he could offer no resistance, and the sense of helplessness was maddening. But his fury was of the white, intense, close-lipped kind. Though he had flung a bitter word or two at Archie, his quarrel was with Destiny. No matter who had decreed this thing, Raymond Fothergill was in fierce revolt.

And yet, through it all, he knew perfectly well that Sissy's death would hardly make any outward change in him. He

was robbed of his best chance, but he did not pretend to himself that his heart was broken or that his life was over. Walter Latimer might fancy that kind of thing, but Fothergill knew that he should be much such a man as he had been before he met her, only somewhat lower, because he had so nearly been something higher and missed it. That was all.

Mrs. Latimer came for a few moments out of the hushed mystery of that inner room. The tidings ran through the expectant groups that Sissy had moved slightly, and had opened her eyes once, but there was little hopefulness in the news. She was terribly injured: that much was certain, but nothing more. Mrs. Latimer wanted her son. "Walter," she said, "you must go home and take the girls. Indeed you must. They cannot stay here, and I cannot send them back without you." Latimer refused, protested, yielded. "Mother," he said, as he turned to go, "you don't know—" His voice suddenly gave way.

"I do know. Oh, my poor boy!" She passed quickly to where Evelyn stood, and told her that Walter had gone to order the horses. "I would rather you were all away before Mrs. Middleton comes," she said: "Henry Hardwicke has gone for her."

This departure was a signal to the rest. The groups melted away, and with sad farewells to one another, and awestruck glances at the windows of the farmhouse, almost all the guests departed. The sound of wheels and horse-hoofs died away in the lanes, and all was very still. The bees hummed busily round the white lilies and the lavender, and on the warm turf of one of the narrow paths lay Archie Carroll.

He had a weight on heart and brain. There had been a moment all blue and sunny, the last of his happy life, when Sissy's laughing face looked back at him and he was a light-hearted-boy. Then had come a moment of horror and incredulous despair, and that black moment had hardened into eternity. Nightmare is hideous, and Archie's very life had become a nightmare. Of course he would

get over it, like his cousin, though, unlike his cousin, he did not think so; and their different moods had their different bitter-nesses. In days to come Carroll would enjoy his life once more, would be ready for a joke or an adventure, would dance the night through, would fall in love. This misery was a swift and terrible entrance into manhood, for he could never be a boy again. And the scar would be left, though the wound would assuredly heal. But Archie, stumbling blindly through that awful pass, never thought that he should come again to the light of day: it was to him as the blackness of a hopeless hell.

CHAPTER L.

THROUGH THE NIGHT.

THE village-clock struck five. As the last lingering stroke died upon the air there was the sound of a carriage rapidly approaching. Carroll raised his head when it stopped at the gate, and saw Hardwicke spring out and help a lady to alight. She was an old lady, who walked quickly to the house, looking neither to right nor left, and vanished within the doorway. Hardwicke stopped, as if to give some order to the driver, and then hurried after her. Archie stared vaguely, first at them, and then at the man, who turned his horses and went round to the stables. When they were out of sight he laid his head down again. The little scene had been a vivid picture which stamped itself with curious distinctness on his brain, yet failed to convey any meaning whatever. He had not the faintest idea of the agony of love and fear in Mrs. Middleton's heart as she passed him. To Archie, just then, the whole universe was *his* agony, and there was no room for more.

Ten minutes later came Dr. Grey's brougham. The doctor, as he jumped out, told his man to wait. He went from the gate to the house more hurriedly than Mrs. Middleton, and his anxiety was more marked, but he found time to look round as he went with keen eyes, which rested for an instant on the young sailor, though

he lay half hidden by the bushes. He too vanished, as the others had vanished.

About an hour later he came out again, and Fothergill followed him. The doctor started when he encountered his eager eyes. Fothergill demanded his opinion. He began some of the usual speeches in which men wrap up the ghastly word "death" in such disguise that it can hardly be recognized.

The soldier cut him short: "Please to speak plain English, Dr. Grey."

The doctor admitted the very greatest danger.

"Danger—yes," said Fothergill, "but is there any hope? I am not a fool—I sha'n't go in and scare the women: is there any hope?"

The answer was written on the doctor's face. He had known Sissy Langton from the time when she came, a tiny child, to Brackenhill. He shook his head, and murmured something about "even if there were no other injury, the spine—"

Fothergill caught a glimpse of a hideous possibility, and answered with an oath. It was not the profanity of the words, so much as the fury with which they were charged, that horrified the good old doctor. "My dear sir," he remonstrated gently, "we must remember that this is God's will."

"God's will! God's will! Are you sure it isn't the devil's?" said Fothergill. "It seems more like it. If you think it is God's will, you may persuade yourself it's yours, for aught I know. But I'm not such a damned hypocrite as to make believe it's mine."

And with a mechanical politeness, curiously at variance with his face and speech, he lifted his hat to the doctor as he turned back to the farmhouse.

So Sissy's doom was spoken—to linger a few hours, more or less, in helpless pain, and then to die. The sun, which had dawned so joyously, was going down as serenely as it had dawned, but it did not matter much to Sissy now. She was sensible, she knew Mrs. Middleton. When the old lady stooped over her she looked up, smiled faintly and said, "I fell."

"Yes, my darling, I know," Aunt Harriet said.

"Can I go home?" Sissy asked after a pause.

"No, dear, you must not think of it: you mustn't ask to go home."

"I thought not," said Sissy.

Mrs. Middleton asked her if she felt much pain.

"I don't know," she said, and closed her eyes.

Later, Henry Hardwicke sent in a message, and the old lady came out to speak to him. He was standing by an open casement in the passage, looking out at the sunset through the orchard boughs. "What is it, Harry?" she said.

He started and turned round: "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Middleton, but I thought in case you wanted to send any telegrams—if—if—I mean I thought you might want to send some, and there is not very much time."

She put her hand to her head. "I ought to, oughtn't I?" she said. "Who should be sent for?"

"Mr. Hammond?" Hardwicke questioned doubtfully.

Something like relief or pleasure lighted her sad eyes: "Yes, yes! send for Godfrey Hammond. He will come." She was about to leave him, but the young fellow stepped forward: "Mrs. Middleton"—was it the clear red light from the window that suddenly flushed his face?—"Mrs. Middleton, shall I send for Mr. Percival Thorne?"

She stopped, looking strangely at him: something in his voice surprised her. "For Percival?" she said.

"May I? I think he ought to come." The hot color was burning on his cheeks. What right had he to betray the secret which he believed he had discovered? And yet could he stand by and not speak for her when she had so little time in which to speak for herself?

"Is it for his sake," said Mrs. Middleton, "or is it that you think—? Well, let it be so: send for Percival. Yes," she added, "perhaps I have misunderstood. Yes, send at once for Percival."

"I'll go," said Harry, hurrying down the passage. "The message shall be

sent off at once. I'll take it to Fordborough."

"Must you go yourself?" Mrs. Middleton raised her voice a little as he moved away.

"No: let me go," said Captain Fothergill, turning the farther corner: "I am going to Fordborough. What is it? I will take it. Mrs. Middleton, you will let me be your messenger?"

"You are very good," she said.—"Harry, you will write—I can't. Oh, I must go back." And she vanished, leaving the two men face to face.

"I've no telegraph-forms," said Harry after a pause. "If you would take the paper to my father, he will send the messages."

Fothergill nodded silently, and went out to make ready for his journey. Hardwicke followed him, and stood in the porch pencilling on the back of an old letter. When Fothergill had given his orders he walked up to Carroll, touched the lad's shoulder with the tips of his fingers, and stood away. "Come," he said.

Archie raised himself from the ground and stumbled to his feet: "Come? where?"

"To Fordborough."

The boy started and stepped back. He looked at the farmhouse, he looked at his cousin. "I'll come afterward," he faltered.

"Nonsense!" said Fothergill. "I'm going now, and of course you go with me."

Archie shrank away, keeping his eyes fixed, as if in a kind of fascination, on his cousin's terrible eyes. The idea of going back alone with Raymond was awful to him. "No, I can't come, Ray—indeed I can't," he said. "I'll walk: I'd much rather—I would indeed."

"What for?" said Fothergill. "You are doing no good here. Do you know I have a message to take? I can't be kept waiting. Don't be a fool," he said in a lower but not less imperative voice.

Archie glanced despairingly round. Hardwicke came forward with the paper in his outstretched hand: "Leave him here, Captain Fothergill. I dare

say I shall go to the inn in the village, and he may go with me. He can take you the earliest news to-morrow morning."

Archie looked breathlessly from one to the other. "As you please," said Fothergill, and strode off without another word.

The boy tried to say something in the way of thanks. "Oh, it's nothing," Hardwicke replied. "You won't care what sort of quarters they may turn out to be, I know." And he went back to the house with a little shrug of his shoulders at the idea of having young Carroll tied to him in this fashion. He did not want the boy, but Hardwicke could never help sacrificing himself.

So Archie went to the gate and watched his cousin ride away, a slim black figure on his black horse against the burning sky. Fothergill never turned his head. Where was the use of looking back? He was intent only on his errand, and when that piece of paper should have been delivered into Mr. Hardwicke's hands the last link between Sissy Langton and himself would be broken. There would be no further service to render. Fothergill did not know that the message he carried was to summon his rival, but it would have made no difference in his feelings if he had. Nothing made any difference now.

Mrs. Middleton sat by Sissy's bedside in the clear evening light. Harry Hardwicke's words haunted her: why did he think that Sissy wanted Percival? They had parted a year ago, and she had believed that Sissy was cured of her liking for him. It was Sissy who had sent him away, and she had been brighter and gayer of late: indeed, Mrs. Middleton had fancied that Walter Latimer— Well, that was over, but if Sissy cared for Percival—

A pair of widely-opened eyes were fixed on her: "Am I going to die, Aunt Harriet?"

"I hope not. Oh, my darling, I pray that you may live."

"I think I am going to die. Will it be very soon? Would there be time to send—"

"We will send for anything or any one you want. Do you feel worse, dear? Time to send for whom?"

"For Percival."

"Harry Hardwicke has sent for him already. Perhaps he has the message by now: it is an hour and a half since the messenger went."

"When will he come?"

"To-morrow, darling."

There was a pause. Then the faint voice came again: "What time?"

Mrs. Middleton went to the door and called softly to Hardwicke. He had been looking in Bradshaw, and she returned directly: "Percival will come by the express to-night. He will be at Fordborough by the quarter-past nine train, and Harry will meet him and bring him over at once—by ten o'clock, he says, or a few minutes later."

Sissy's brows contracted for a moment: she was calculating the time. "What is it now?" she said.

"Twenty minutes to eight."

Fourteen hours and a half! The whole night between herself and Percival! The darkness must come and must go, the sun must set and must again be high in the heavens, before he could stand by her side. It seemed to Sissy as if she were going down into the blackness of an awful gulf, where Death was waiting for her. Would she have strength to escape him, to toil up the farther side, and to reach the far-off to-morrow and Percival? "Aunt Harriet," she said, "shall I live till then? I want to speak to him."

"Yes, my darling—indeed you will. Don't talk so: you will break my heart. Perhaps God will spare you."

"No," said Sissy—"no."

Between eight and nine Hardwicke was summoned again. Mrs. Latimer wanted some one to go to Latimer's Court, to take the latest news and to say that it was impossible she could return that night. "You see they went away before Dr. Grey came," she said. "I have written a little note. Can you find me a messenger?"

"I will either find one or I will go myself," he replied.

"Oh, I didn't mean to trouble you. And wait a moment, for Mrs. Middleton wants him to go on to her house, She will come and speak to you when I go back to the poor girl."

"How is Miss Langton?"

"I hardly know. I think she is wandering a little: she talked just now about some embroidery she has been doing—asked for it, in fact."

"When Dr. Grey was obliged to go he didn't think there would be any change before he came back, surely?" said Hardwicke anxiously.

"No. But she can't know what she is saying, can she? Poor girl! she will never do another stitch." Mrs. Latimer fairly broke down. The unfinished embroidery which never could be finished brought the truth home to her. It is hard to realize that a life with its interlacing roots and fibres is broken off short.

"Oh, Mrs. Latimer, don't! don't!" Harry exclaimed, aghast at her tears. "For dear Mrs. Middleton's sake!" He rushed away, and returned with wine. "If you give way what will become of us?"

She was better in a few minutes, and able to go back, while Harry waited in quiet confidence for Mrs. Middleton. He was not afraid of a burst of helpless weeping when she came. She was gentle, yielding, delicate, but there was something of the old squire's obstinacy in her, and in a supreme emergency it came out as firmness. She looked old and frail as she stepped into the passage and closed the door after her. Her hand shook, but her eyes met his bravely and her lips were firm.

"You'll have some wine too," he said, pouring it out as a matter of course. "You can drink it while you tell me what I am to do."

She took the glass with a slight inclination of her head, and explained that she wanted an old servant who had been Sissy's nurse when she was a little child. "Mrs. Latimer is very kind," she said, "but Sissy will like her own people best. And Sarah would be broken-hearted—" She paused. "Here is a list of things that I wish her to bring."

"Mrs. Latimer thought Miss Langton was not quite herself," he said inquiringly.

"Do you mean because she talked of her work? Oh, I don't think so. She answers quite sensibly—indeed, she speaks quite clearly. That was the only thing."

"Then is it down in the list, this needlework? Or where is it to be found?"

"You will bring it?" said Mrs. Middleton. "Well, perhaps—"

"If she should ask again," he said.

"True. Yes, yes, bring it." She told him where to find the little case. "The fancy may haunt her. How am I to thank you, Harry?"

"Not at all," he said. "Only let me do what I can."

It was nearly eleven before Hardwicke had accomplished his double errand and returned with Sarah. The stars were out, the ruins of the priory rose in great black masses against the sky, the farmhouse windows beneath the overhanging eaves were like bright eyes gazing out into the night. Dr. Grey had come back in the interval, and had seen his patient. There was nothing new to say, and nothing to be done, except to make the path to the grave as little painful as might be. He was taking a nap in Mr. Greenwell's arm-chair when the young man came in, but woke up clear and alert in a moment. "Ah, you have come?" he said, recognizing the old servant. "That's well: you'll save your mistress a little. Only, mind, we mustn't have any crying. If there is anything of that sort you will do more harm than good."

Sarah deigned no reply, but passed on. Mrs. Middleton came out to meet them. Sissy had not spoken. She lay with her eyes shut, and moaned now and then. "Are you going home, Harry?" said the old lady.

"Only into the village: I've got a room at the Latimer Arms. It isn't two minutes' walk from here, so I can be fetched directly if I'm wanted."

"And you will be sure to meet the train?"

"I will: you may depend upon me. But I shall come here first."

"Good-night, then. Go and get some rest."

Hardwicke went off to look for Archie Carroll. He found him in the square flagged hall, sitting on the corner of a window-seat, with his head leaning against the frame, among Mrs. Greenwell's geraniums. "Come along, old fellow," said Harry.

There was only a glimmering candle, and the hall was very dim. Archie got up submissively and groped his way after his guide. "Where are we going?" he asked as the door was opened.

"To a little public-house close by. We couldn't ask the Greenwells to take us in."

As they went out into the road the priory rose up suddenly on the left and towered awfully above them. Carroll shuddered, drew closer to his companion and kept his eyes fixed on the ground. "I feel as if I were the ghost of myself, and those were the ghosts of the ruins," he said as he hurried past.

The flight of fancy was altogether beyond Hardwicke: "You've been sitting alone and thinking. There has been nothing for you to do, and I couldn't help leaving you. Here we are."

They turned into the little sanded parlor of the ale-house. Hardwicke had looked in previously and given his orders, and supper was laid ready for them. He sat down and began to help himself, but Archie at first refused to eat.

"Nonsense!" said Harry. "You have had nothing since the beginning of the day. We must not break down, any of us." And with a little persuasion he prevailed, and saw the lad make a tolerable supper and drink some brandy and water afterward. "Vile brandy!" said Hardwicke as he set his tumbler down. Archie was leaning with both elbows on the table, gazing at him. His eyes were heavy and swollen, and there were purple shadows below them.

"Mr. Hardwicke," he said, "you've been very good to me. Do you think it was my fault?"

"Do I think what was your fault?"

"*This!*" Archie said—"to-day."

"No—not if I understand it."

"Ray said if he had been there—"

"I wish he had been. But we must not expect old heads on young shoulders. How did it happen?"

"We climbed up on the wall, and she was saying how narrow and broken it was, and I picked some of that stuff and called to her, and as she looked back—"

Hardwicke groaned. "It was madly imprudent," he said. "But I don't blame you. You didn't think. Poor fellow! I only hope you won't think too much in future. Come, it's time for bed."

"I don't want to sleep," Archie answered: "I can't sleep."

"Very well," said Hardwicke. "But I must try and get a little rest. They had only one room for us, so if you can't sleep you'll keep quiet and let a fellow see what he can do in that line. And you may call me in the morning if I don't wake. But don't worry yourself, for I shall."

"What time?" said Carroll.

"Oh, from five to six—not later than six."

But in half an hour it was Carroll who lay worn out and sleeping soundly, and Hardwicke who was counting the slow minutes of that intolerable night.

Sarah had been indignant that Dr. Grey should tell her not to cry. But when Sissy looked up with a gentle smile of recognition, and instead of calling her by her name said "Nurse," as she used to say in old times, the good woman was very near it indeed, and was obliged to go away to the window to try to swallow the lump that rose up in her throat and almost choked her.

Mrs. Middleton sat by her darling's bedside. She had placed the little work-case in full view, and presently Sissy noticed it and would have it opened. The half-finished strip of embroidery was laid within easy reach of hand and eye. She smiled, but was not satisfied. "The case," she said. Her fingers strayed feebly among the little odds and ends which it contained, and closed over something which she kept.

Then there was a long silence, unbroken till Sissy was thirsty and wanted

something to drink. "What time?" she said when she had finished.

"Half-past twelve."

"It's very dark."

"We will have another candle," said Aunt Harriet.

"No: the candle only makes me see how dark it is all round."

Again there was silence, but not so long this time. And again Sissy broke it: "Aunt Harriet, he is coming now."

"Yes, darling, he is coming."

"I feel as if I saw the train, with red lights in front, coming through the night—always coming, but never any nearer."

"But it *is* nearer every minute. Percival is nearer now than when you spoke."

Sissy said "Yes," and was quiet again till between one and two. Then Mrs. Middleton perceived that her eyes were open. "What is it, dear child?" she said.

"The night is so long!"

"Sissy," said Aunt Harriet softly, "I want you to listen to me. A year ago, when Godfrey died and I talked about the money that I hoped to leave you one day, you told me what you should like me to do with it instead, because you had enough and you thought it was not fair. I didn't quite understand then, and I would not promise. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"Sissy, shall I promise now? I've been thinking about it, and I've no wish on earth but to make you happy. Will it make you happier if I promise now that it shall be as you said?"

"Yes," said Sissy with eager eyes.

"Then I do promise: all that is mine to leave he shall have."

Sissy answered with a smile. "Kiss me," she said. And so the promise was sealed. After that the worst of the night seemed somehow to be over. Sissy slept a little, and Aunt Harriet nodded once or twice in the easy-chair. Starting into wakefulness after one of these moments, she saw the outline of the window faintly defined in gray, and thanked God that the dawn had come.

CHAPTER LI.

BY THE EXPRESS.

MR. HARDWICKE, not knowing Percival Thorne's precise address, had telegraphed to Godfrey Hammond, begging him to forward the message without delay. A couple of days earlier Hammond had suddenly taken it into his head that he was tired of being in town and would go away somewhere. In a sort of whimsical amusement at his own mood he decided that the Land's End ought to suit a misanthrope, and promptly took a ticket for Penzance as a considerable step in the right direction.

It made no difference to Percival, for Hammond had left full directions with a trustworthy servant in case any letters should come for Mr. Thorne, and the man sent the message on to Brenthill at once. But it made a difference to Hammond himself. When Hardwicke despatched the telegram to his address in town Godfrey lay on the turf at the Lizard Head, gazing southward across the sunlit sea, while the seabirds screamed and the white waves broke on the jagged rocks far below.

But with Percival there was no delay. The message found him in Bellevue street, though he did not return there immediately after his parting with Judith. He wanted the open air, the sky overhead, movement and liberty to calm the joyful tumult in heart and brain. He hastened to the nearest point whence he could look over trees and fields. The prospect was not very beautiful. The trees were few—some cropped willows by a mud-banked rivulet and a group or two of gaunt and melancholy elms. And the fields had a trodden, suburban aspect, which made it hardly needful to stick up boards describing them as eligible building-ground. Yet there was grass, such as it was, and daisies sprinkled here and there, and soft cloud-shadows gliding over it. Percival's unreal and fantastic dream had perished suddenly when Judith put her hand in his. Now, as he walked across these meadows, he saw a new vision, that dream of noble, simple poverty, which, if it could but be realized, would be the fairest of all.

When he returned from his walk, and came once more to the well-known street which he was learning to call "home," he was so much calmer that he thought he was quite himself again. Not the languid, hopeless self who had lived there once, but a self young, vigorous, elate, rejoicing in the present and looking confidently toward the future.

This I can tell,
That all will go well,

was the keynote of his mood. He felt as if he trod on air—as if he had but to walk boldly forward and every obstacle must give way. The door of No. 13 was open, and a boy who had brought a telegram was turning away from it. Hurrying in with eager eyes and his face bright with unspoken joy, Percival nearly ran up against Mrs. Bryant and Emma, whose heads were close together over the address on the envelope.

"Lor! Mr. Thorne, how you startled me! It's for you," said his landlady.

He went up the stairs two at a time, with his message in his hand. Here was some good news—not for one moment did he dream it could be other than good news—come to crown this day, already the whitest of his life. He tore the paper open and read it by the red sunset light, hotly reflected from a wilderness of tiles.

He read it twice—thrice—caught at the window-frame to steady himself, and stood staring vaguely at the smoke which curled upward from a neighboring chimney. He was stunned. The words seemed to have a meaning and no meaning. "This is not how people receive news of death, surely?" he thought. "I suppose I am in my right senses, or is it a dream?"

He made a strong effort to regain his self-command, but all certainties eluded him. This was not the first time that he had taken up a telegram and believed that he read the tidings of Sissy's death. He had misunderstood it now as then. It could not be. But why could he not wake?

"Ashendale." Yes, he remembered Ashendale. He had ridden past the ruins the last day he ever rode with Sissy, the day that Horace came home.

It belonged to the Latimers—to Walter Latimer. And Sissy was dying at Ashendale!

All at once he knew that it was no dream. But the keen edge of pain awoke him to the thought of what he had to do, and sent him to hunt among a heap of papers for a time-table. He drew a long breath. The express started at 10.5, and it was now but twenty minutes past eight.

He caught up his hat and hurried to the office. Mr. Ferguson, who seldom left much before that time, was on the doorstep. While he was getting into his dog-cart Percival hastily explained that he had been summoned on a matter of life and death. "Sorry to hear it," said the lawyer as he took the reins—"hope you may find things better than you expect. We shall see you again when you come back." And with a nod he rattled down the street. Percival stood on the pavement gazing after him, when he suddenly remembered that he had no money. "I might have asked him to give me my half week's salary," he reflected. "Not that that would have paid my fare."

A matter of life and death! Sissy waiting for him at Ashendale, and no money to pay for a railway-ticket! It would have been absurd if it had not been horrible. What had he to sell or pawn? By the time he could go to Bellevue street and return would not the shops be shut? It was a quarter to nine already. He did not even know where any pawnbroker lived, nor what he could take to him, and the time was terribly short. He was hurrying homeward while these thoughts passed through his mind when Judith's words came back to him: "I have a pound or two to spare, and I feel quite rich." He took the first turning toward Miss Macgregor's house.

Outside her door he halted for a moment. If they would not let him see Judith, how was he to convey his request? He felt in his pocket, found the telegram and pencilled below the message, "Sissy Langton was once to have been my wife: we parted, and I have never seen her since. I have not money enough for my railway-fare: can

you help me?" He folded it and rang the bell.

No, he could not see Miss Lisle. She was particularly engaged. "Very well," he said: "be so good as to take this note to her, and I will wait for the answer." His manner impressed the girl so much that, although she had been carefully trained by Miss Macgregor, she cast but one hesitating glance at the umbrella-stand before she went on her errand.

Percival waited, eager to be off, yet well assured that it was all right since it was in Judith's hands. Presently the servant returned and gave him a little packet. The wax of the seal was still warm. He opened it where he stood, and by the light of Miss Macgregor's hall-lamp read the couple of lines it contained:

"I cannot come, but I send you all the money I have. I pray God you may be in time. Yours, JUDITH."

There were two sovereigns and some silver. He told the girl to thank Miss Lisle, and went out into the dusk as the clocks were striking nine. Ten minutes brought him to Bellevue street, and rushing up to his room he began to put a few things into a little travelling-bag. In his haste he neglected to shut the door, and Mrs. Bryant, whose curiosity had been excited, came upon him in the midst of this occupation.

"And what may be the meaning of this, Mr. Thorne, if I may make so bold as to ask?" she said, eying him doubtfully from the doorway.

Percival explained that he had had bad news and was off by the express.

Mrs. Bryant's darkest suspicions were aroused. She said it was a likely story.

"Why, you gave me the telegram yourself," he answered indifferently while he caught up a couple of collars. He was too much absorbed to heed either Mrs. Bryant or his packing.

"And who sent it, I should like to know?"

Percival made no answer, and she began to grumble about people who had money enough to travel all over the country at a minute's notice if they liked, and

none to pay their debts—people who made promises by the hour together, and then sneaked off, leaving boxes with nothing inside them, she'd be bound.

Thus baited, Percival at last turned angrily upon her, but before he could utter a word another voice interposed: "What are you always worrying about, ma? Do come down and have your supper, and let Mr. Thorne finish his packing. He'll pay you every halfpenny he owes you: don't you know that?" And the door was shut with such decision that it was a miracle that Mrs. Bryant was not dashed against the opposite wall. "Come along," said Lydia: "there's toasted cheese."

Percival ran down stairs five minutes later with his bag in his hand. He turned into his sitting-room, picked up a few papers and thrust them into his desk. He was in the act of locking it when he heard a step behind him, and looking round he saw Lydia. She had a cup of tea and some bread and butter, which she set down before him. "You haven't had a morsel since the middle of the day," she said. "Just you drink this. Oh, you must: there's lots of time."

"Miss Bryant, this is very kind of you, but I don't think—"

"Just you drink it," said Lydia, "and eat a bit too, or you'll be good for nothing." And while Percival hastily obeyed she glanced round the room: "Nobody'll meddle with your things while you're gone: don't you trouble yourself."

"Oh, I didn't suspect that any one would," he replied, hardly thinking whether it was likely or not as he swallowed the bread and butter.

"Well, that was very nice of you, I'm sure. I should have suspected a lot if I'd been you," said Lydia candidly. "But nobody shall. Now, you aren't going to leave that tea? Why, it wants twenty minutes to ten, and not six minutes' walk to the station!"

Percival finished the tea: "Thank you very much, Miss Bryant."

"And I say," Lydia pursued, pulling her curl with less than her usual consideration for its beauty, "I suppose you

have got money enough? Because if not, I'll lend you a little. Don't you mind what ma says, Mr. Thorne. I know you're all right.

"You are very good," said Percival. "I didn't expect so much kindness, and I've been borrowing already, so I needn't trouble you. But thank you for your confidence in me and for your thoughtfulness." He held out his hand to Lydia, and thus bade farewell to Bellevue street.

She stood for a moment looking after him. Only a few hours before she would have rejoiced in any small trouble or difficulty which might have befallen Mr. Thorne. But when he turned round upon her mother and herself as they stood at his door, her spite had vanished before the sorrowful anxiety of his eyes. She had frequently declared that Mr. Thorne was no gentleman, and that she despised him, but she knew in her heart that he *was* a gentleman, and she was ashamed of her mother's behavior. Lydia was capable of being magnanimous, provided the object of her magnanimity were a man. I doubt if she could have been magnanimous to a woman. But Percival Thorne was a young and handsome man, and though she did not know what his errand might be, she knew that she was not sending him to Miss Lisle. Standing before his glass, she smoothed back her hair with both hands, arranged the ribbon at her throat and admired the blue earrings and a large locket which she wore suspended from a chain. Even while she thought kindly of Mr. Thorne, and wished him well, she was examining her complexion and her hands with the eye of a critic. "I don't believe that last stuff is a mite of good," she said to herself; "and it's no end of bother. I might as well pitch the bottle out of the window. It was just as well that he'd borrowed the money of some one else, but I'm glad I offered it. I wonder when he'll come back?" And with that Lydia returned to her toasted cheese.

Percival had had a nervous fear of some hinderance on his way to the station. It was so urgent that he should go by this train that the necessity oppressed

him like a nightmare. An earthquake seemed a not improbable thing. He was seriously afraid that he might lose his way during the five minutes' walk through familiar streets. He imagined an error of half an hour or so in all the Brenthill clocks. He hardly knew what he expected, but he felt it a relief when he came to the station and found it standing in its right place, quietly awaiting him. He was the first to take a ticket, and the moment the train drew up by the platform his hand was on the door of a carriage, though before getting in he stopped a porter to inquire if this were the express. The porter answered "Yes, sir—all right," with the half smile of superior certainty: what else could it be? Thorne took his place and waited a few minutes, which seemed an eternity. Then the engine screamed, throbbed, and with quickening speed rushed out into the night.

A man was asleep in one corner of the carriage, otherwise Percival was alone. His nervous anxiety subsided, since nothing further depended upon him till he reached town, and he sat thinking of Sissy and of that brief engagement which had already receded into a shadowy past. "It was a mistake," he mused, "and she found it out before it was too late. But I believe her poor little heart has been aching for me, lest she wounded me too cruelly that night. It wasn't her fault. She would have hid her fear of me, poor child! if she had been able. And she was so sorry for me in my trouble! I don't think she could be content to go on her way and take her happiness now while my life was spoilt and miserable. Poor little Sissy! she will be glad to know—"

And then he remembered that it was to a dying Sissy that the tidings of marriage and hope must be uttered, if uttered at all. And he sat as it were in a dull dream, trying to realize how the life which in the depths of his poverty had seemed so beautiful and safe was suddenly cut short, and how Sissy at that moment lay in the darkness, waiting—waiting—waiting. The noise of the train took up his thought, and set it to a monotonous rep-

etition of "Waiting at Ashendale! waiting at Ashendale!" If only she might live till he could reach her! He seemed to be hurrying onward, yet no nearer. His overwrought brain caught up the fancy that Death and he were side by side, racing together through the dark, at breathless, headlong speed, to Sissy, where she waited for them both.

Outside, the landscape lay dim and small, dwarfed by the presence of the night. And with the lights burning on its breast, as Sissy saw them in her half-waking visions, the express rushed southward across the level blackness of the land, beneath the arch of midnight sky.

CHAPTER LII.

Quand on a trouvé ce qu'on cherchait, on n'a pas le temps de le dire : il faut mourir.—J. JOUBERT.

WHEN the gray of the early morning had changed to golden sunlight, and the first faint twittering of the birds gave place to fuller melody, Mrs. Middleton went softly to the window, opened it and fastened it back. She drew a long breath of the warm air fresh from the beanfields, and, looking down into the little orchard below, saw Harry Hardwicke, who stepped forward and looked up at her. She signed to him to wait, and a couple of minutes later she joined him.

"How is she? How has she passed the night?" he asked eagerly.

"She is no worse. She has lived through it bravely, with one thought. You were very right to send for Percival."

Hardwicke looked down and colored as he had colored when he spoke of him before. "I'm glad," he said. "I'm off to fetch him in about an hour and a half."

"Nothing from Godfrey Hammond?" she asked after a pause.

"No. I'll ask at my father's as I go by. He will either come or we shall hear, unless he is out."

"Of course," the old lady answered. "Godfrey Hammond would not fail me. And now good-bye, Harry, till you bring Percival."

She went away as swiftly and lightly as she had come a minute before, and left Hardwicke standing on the turf under the apple trees gazing up at the open casement. A June morning, sun shining, soft winds blowing, a young lover under his lady's window: it should have been a perfect poem. And the lady within lay crushed and maimed, dying in the very heart of her June!

Hardwicke let himself out through the little wicket-gate, and went back to the Latimer Arms. He entered the bedroom without disturbing Archie, who lay with his sunburnt face on the white pillow, smiling in his sleep. He could not find it in his heart to arouse him. The boy's lips parted, he murmured a word or two, and seemed to sink into a yet deeper slumber. Hardwicke went softly out, gave the landlady directions about breakfast, and returned, watch in hand. "I suppose I must," he said to himself.

But he stopped short. Carroll stirred, stretched himself, his eyes were half open: evidently his waking was a pleasant one. But suddenly the unfamiliar aspect of the room attracted his attention: he looked eagerly round, a shadow swept across his face, and he turned and saw Hardwicke. "It's true!" he said, and flung out his arms in a paroxysm of despair.

Harry walked to the window and leant out. Presently a voice behind him asked, "Have you been to the farm, Mr. Hardwicke?"

"Yes," said Harry. "But there is no news. She passed a tolerably quiet night: there is no change."

"I've been asleep," said Archie after a pause. "I never thought I should sleep." He looked ashamed of having done so.

"It would have been strange if you hadn't: you were worn out."

"My watch has run down," the other continued. "What is the time?"

"Twenty minutes past seven. I want to speak to you, Carroll. I think you had better go home."

"Home? To Fordborough? To Raymond?"

"No. Really home, to your own people. You can write to your cousin. You don't want to go back to him?"

Archie shook his head. Then a sudden sense of injustice to Fothergill prompted him to say, "Ray was never hard on me before."

"You mustn't think about that," Hardwicke replied. "People don't weigh their words at such times. But, Carroll, you can do nothing here—less than nothing. You'll be better away. Give me your address, and I'll write any news there is. Look sharp now, and you can go into Fordborough with me and catch the up train."

As they drove through the green lanes, along which they had passed the day before, Archie looked right and left, recalling the incidents of that earlier drive. Already he was better, possessing his sorrow with greater keenness and fullness than at first, but not so miserably possessed by it. Hardly a word was spoken till they stood on the platform and a far-off puff of white showed the coming train. Then he said, "I shall never forget your kindness, Mr. Hardwicke. If ever there's anything I can do—"

"You'll do it," said Harry with a smile.

"That I will! And you'll write?"

Hardwicke answered "Yes." He knew too well *what* it was he promised to write to say a word more.

It was a relief to him when Carroll was gone and he could pace the platform and watch for the London train. He looked through the open doorway, and saw his dogcart waiting in the road and the horse tossing his head impatiently in the sunshine. Through all his anxiety—or rather side by side with his anxiety—he was conscious of a current of interest in all manner of trivial things. He thought of the price he had given for the horse five months before, and of Latimer's opinion of his bargain. He noticed the station-master in the distance, and remembered that some one had said he drank. He watched a row of small birds sitting on the telegraph-wires just outside the station, and all at once the London train came gliding rapidly and unexpectedly out of the cutting close by, and was there.

A hurried rush along the line of carriages, with his heart sinking lower at

every step, a despairing glance round, and he perceived the man he came to meet walking off at the farther end of the platform. He came up with him as he stopped to speak to a porter.

"Ah! I am in time, then?" said Percival when he looked round in reply to Hardwicke's hurried greeting.

"Yes, thank God! I promised to drive you over to Ashendale at once."

Percival nodded, and took his place without a word. Not till they were fairly started on their journey did he turn to his companion. "How did it happen?" he asked.

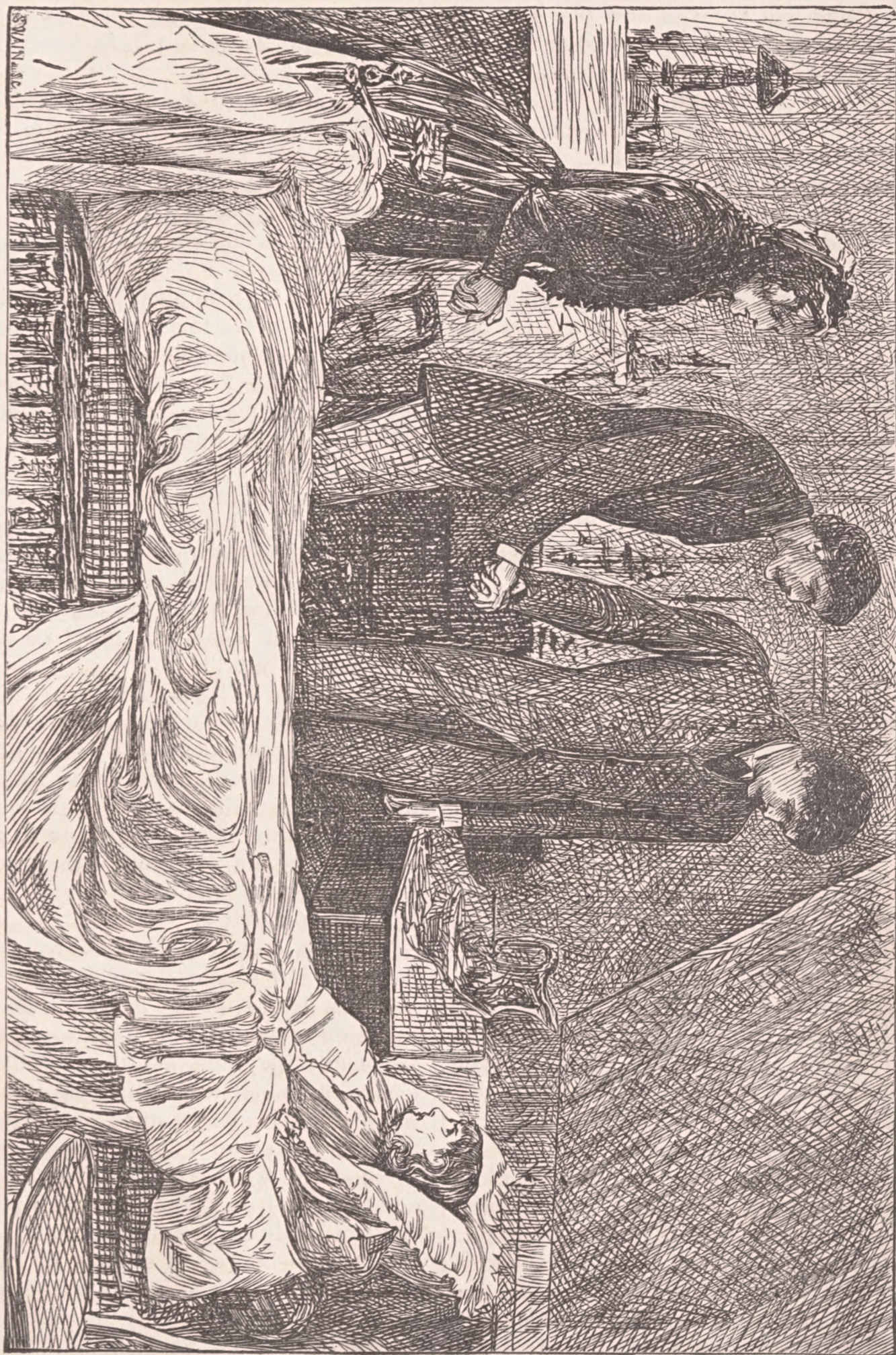
Hardwicke gave him a brief account of the accident. He listened eagerly, and then, just saying "It's very dreadful," he was silent again. But it was the silence of a man intent on his errand, leaning slightly forward as if drawn by a powerful attraction, and with eyes fixed on the point where he would first see the ruins of Ashendale Priory above the trees. Hardwicke did not venture to speak to him. As the man whom Sissy Langton loved, Percival Thorne was to him the first of men, but, considered from Hardwicke's own point of view, he was a fellow with whom he had little or nothing in common—a man who quoted poetry and saw all manner of things in pictures and ruins, who went out of his way to think about politics, and was neither Conservative nor Radical when all was done—a man who rather disliked dogs and took no interest in horses. Hardwicke did not want to speak about dogs, horses or politics then, but the consciousness of their want of sympathy was in his mind.

As they drove through the village they caught a passing glimpse of a brougham. "Ha! Brackenhill," said Thorne, looking after it. They dashed round a corner and pulled up in front of the farmhouse. Hardwicke took no pains to spare the noise of their arrival. He knew very well that the sound of wheels would be music to Sissy's ears.

A tall, slim figure, which even on that June morning had the air of being wrapped up, passed and repassed in the hall within. As the two young men came up

the path Horace appeared in the porch. | a year had wrought in him startled Percival. He was a mere shadow. He had

"SEE HERE, SISSY," SAID PERCIVAL, "WE ARE FRIENDS."—Page 278.



looked ill before, but now he looked as if he were dying.

"She will not see me," he said to Hardwicke. His voice was that of a

confirmed invalid, a mixture of complaint and helplessness. He ignored his cousin.

"She will see you now that Percival has come," said Mrs. Middleton, advancing from the background. "She will see you together."

And she led the way. Horace went in second, and Percival last, yet he was the first to meet the gaze of those waiting eyes. The young men stood side by side, looking down at the delicate face on the pillow. It was pale, and seemed smaller than usual in the midst of the loosened waves of hair. On one side of the forehead there was a dark mark, half wound, half bruise—a mere nothing but for its terrible suggestiveness. But the clear eyes and the gentle little mouth were unchanged. Horace said "Oh, Sissy!" and Sissy said "Percival." He could not speak, but stooped and kissed the little hand which lay passively on the coverlet.

"Whisper," said Sissy. He bent over her. "Have you forgiven him?" she asked.

"Yes." The mere thought of enmity was horrible to him as he looked into Sissy's eyes with that spectral Horace by his side.

"Are you sure? Quite?"

"Before God and you, Sissy."

"Tell him so, Percival."

He stood up and turned to his cousin. "Horace!" he said, and held out his hand. The other put a thin hot hand into it.—"See here, Sissy," said Percival, "we are friends."

"Yes, we're friends," Horace repeated. "Has it vexed you, Sissy? I thought you didn't care about me. I'm sorry, dear—I'm very sorry."

Aunt Harriet, standing by, laid her hand on his arm. She had held aloof for that long year, feeling that he was in the wrong. He had not acted as a Thorne should, and he could never be the same to her as in old days. But she had wanted her boy, nevertheless, right or wrong, and since Percival had pardoned him, and since it was partly Godfrey's hardness that had driven him into deceit, and since he was so ill, and

since—and since—she loved him, she drew his head down to her and kissed him. Horace was weak, and he had to turn his face away and wipe his eyes. But, relinquishing Percival's hand, he held Aunt Harriet's.

Percival stooped again, in obedience to a sign from Sissy. "Ask him to forgive me," she said.

"He knows nothing, dear."

"Ask him for me."

"Horace," said Percival, "Sissy wants your forgiveness."

"I've nothing to forgive," said Horace. "It is I who ought to ask to be forgiven. It was hard on me when first you came to Brackenhill, Percy, but it has been harder on you since. I hardly know what I said or did on that day: I thought you'd been plotting against me."

"No, no," said Sissy—"not he."

"No, but I did think so.—Since then I've felt that, anyhow, it was not fair. I suppose I was too proud to say so, or hardly knew how, especially as the wrong is past mending. But I do ask your pardon now."

"You have it," said Percival. "We didn't understand each other very well."

"But I never blamed you, Sissy—never, for one moment. I wasn't so bad as that. I've watched for you now and then in Fordborough streets, just to get a glimpse as you went by. I thought it was you who would never forgive me, because of Percival."

"He has forgiven," said Sissy. But her eyes still sought Percival's.

"Look here, Horace," he said. "There was a misunderstanding you knew nothing of, and Sissy feels that she might have cleared it up. It *was* cleared up at last, but I think it altered my grandfather's manner to you for a time. If you wish to know the whole I will tell you. But since it is all over and done with, and did not really do you any harm, if you like best"—he looked steadily at Horace—"that we should forgive and forget on both sides, we will bury the past here to-day."

"Yes, yes," said Horace. "Sissy may have made a mistake, but she never meant me any harm, I know."

"Don't! don't! Oh, Horace, I did, but I am sorry."

"God knows I forgive you, whatever it was," he said.

"Kiss me, Horace."

He stooped and kissed her, as he had kissed her many a time when she was his little pet and playmate. She kissed him back again, and smiled: "Good-bye, Horry!"

Mrs. Middleton interposed. "This will be too much for her," she said.—"Percival, she wants you, I see: be careful." And she drew Horace gently away.

Percival sat down by the bedside. Presently Sarah came in and went to the farther end of the room, waiting in case she should be wanted. Sissy was going to speak once, but Percival stopped her: "Lie still a little while, dear: I'm not going away."

She lay still, looking up at this Percival for whom she had watched and waited through the dreary night, and who had come to her with the morning. And he, as he sat by her side, was thinking how at that time the day before he was in the office at Brenthill. He could hardly believe that less than twenty-four hours had given him the assurance of Judith's love and brought him to Sissy's deathbed. He was in a strangely exalted state of mind. His face was calm as if cast in bronze, but a crowd of thoughts and feelings contended for the mastery beneath it. He had eaten nothing since the night before, and had not slept, but his excitement sustained him.

He met Sissy's eyes and smiled tenderly. How was it that he had frightened her in old days? Could he ever have been cruel to one so delicate and clinging? Yet he must have been, since he had driven away her love. She was afraid of him: she had begged to be free. Well, the past was past, but at least no word nor look of his should frighten or grieve the poor child now.

After a time she spoke: "You have worked too hard. Isn't it that you wanted to do something great?"

"That isn't at all likely," said Percival with a melancholy smile. "I'm all right, Sissy."

"No, you are pale. You wanted to surprise us. Oh, I guessed! Godfrey Hammond didn't tell me. I should have been glad if I could have waited to see it."

"Don't talk so," he entreated. "There will be nothing to see."

"You mustn't work too hard—promise," she whispered.

"No, dear, I won't."

"Percival, will you be good to me?"

"If I can I will indeed. What can I do?"

"I want you to have my money. It is my own, and I have nobody." Sissy remembered the terrible mistake she had once made, and wanted an assurance from his own lips that her gift was accepted.

Percival hesitated for a moment, and even the moment's hesitation alarmed her. It was true, as she said, that she had nobody, and her words opened a golden gateway before Judith and himself. Should he tell her of that double joy and double gratitude? He believed that she would be glad, but it seemed selfish and horrible to talk of love and marriage by that bedside. "I wish you might live to need it all yourself, dear," he answered, and laid his hand softly on hers. The strip of embroidery caught his eye. "What's this?" he said in blank surprise. "And your thimble! Sissy, you mustn't bother yourself about this work now." He would have drawn it gently away.

The fingers closed on it suddenly, and the weak voice panted: "No, Percival. It's mine. That was before we were engaged: you spoilt my other."

"O God!" he said. In a moment all came back to him. He remembered the summer day at Brackenhill—Sissy and he upon the terrace—the work-box upset and the thimble crushed beneath his foot. He remembered her pretty reproaches and their laughter over her enforced idleness. He remembered how he rode into Fordborough and bought that little gold thimble—the first present he ever made her. All his gifts during their brief engagement had been scrupulously returned, but this, as she had said, was given before. And she was

dying with it in her hand! She had loved him from first to last.

"Percival, you will take my money?" she pleaded, fearing some incomprehensible scruple.

"For God's sake, Sissy! I must think a moment." He buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, you are cruel!" she whispered.

How could he think? Sissy loved him—had always loved him. It was all plain to him now. He had been blind, and he had come back to find out the truth the day after he had pledged himself to Judith Lisle!

"Don't be unkind to me, Percival: I can't bear it, dear."

How could he stab her to the heart by a refusal of that which he so sorely needed? How could he tell her of his engagement? How could he keep silence, and take her money to spend it with Judith?

"Say 'Yes,' Percival. It is mine. Why not? why not?"

He spoke through his clasped hands: "One moment more."

"I shall never ask you anything again," she whispered. "Oh, Percival, be good to me!"

He raised his head and looked earnestly at her. He must be true, happen what might.

"Sissy, God knows I thank you for your goodness. I sha'n't forget it, living or dying. If only you might be spared—"

"No, no. Say 'Yes,' Percival."

"I will say 'Yes' if, when I have done, you wish it still. But it must be 'Yes' for some one besides myself. Dear, don't give it to me to make amends in any way. You have not wronged me, Sissy. Don't give it to me, dear, unless you give it to Judith Lisle."

As he spoke he looked into her eyes. Their sweet entreaty gave place to a flash of pained reproach, as if they said "So soon?" Then the light in them wavered and went out. Percival sprang up. "Help! she has fainted!"

Sarah hurried from her post by the window, and the sound of quick footsteps brought back Mrs. Middleton.

The young man stood aside, dismayed. "She isn't dead?" he said in a low voice.

Aunt Harriet did not heed him. A horrible moment passed, during which he felt himself a murderer. Then Sissy moaned and turned her face a little to the wall.

"Go now: she cannot speak to you," said Mrs. Middleton.

"I can't. Only one more word!"

"What do you mean? What have you done? You may wait outside, and I will call you. She cannot bear any more now: do you want to kill her outright?"

He went. There was a wide window-seat in the passage, and he dropped down upon it, utterly worn out and wretched. "What have I done?" he asked himself. "What made me do it? She loved me, and I have been a brute to her. If I had been a devil, could I have tortured her more?"

Presently Mrs. Middleton came to him: "She cannot see you now, but she is better."

He looked up at her as he sat: "Aunt Harriet, I meant it for the best. Say what you like: I was a brute, I suppose, but I thought I was doing right."

"What do you mean?" Her tone was gentler: she detected the misery in his.

Percival took her hand and laid it on his forehead. "You can't think I meant to be cruel to our Sissy," he said. "You will let me speak to her?"

She softly pushed back his hair. After all, he was the man Sissy loved. "What was it?" she asked: "what did you do?"

He looked down. "I'm going to marry Miss Lisle," he said.

She started away from him: "You told her that? God forgive you, Percival!"

"I should have been a liar if I hadn't."

"Couldn't you let her die in peace? It is such a little while! Couldn't you have waited till she was in her grave?"

"Will she see me? Just one word, Aunt Harriet." And yet while he pleaded he did not know what the one word was that he would say. Only he felt that he must see her once more.

"Not now," said Mrs. Middleton. "My poor darling shall not be tortured any

more. Later, if she wishes it, but not now. She could not bear it."

"But you will ask her to see me later?" he entreated. "I must see her."

"What is she to you? She is all the world to me, and she shall be left in peace. It is all that I can do for her now. You have been cruel to her always—always. She has been breaking her heart for you: she lived through last night with the hope of your coming. Oh, Percival, God knows I wish we had never called you away from Miss Lisle!"

"Don't say that."

"Go back to her," said Aunt Harriet, "and leave my darling to me. We were happy at Brackenhill till you came there."

He sprang to his feet: "Aunt Harriet! have some mercy! You know I would die if it could make Sissy any happier."

"And Miss Lisle?" she said.

He turned away with a groan, and, leaning against the wall, put his hand over his eyes. Mrs. Middleton hesitated a moment, but her haste to return to Sissy triumphed over any relenting feelings, and she left him, pausing only at the door to make sure of her calmness.

Noon came and passed. Sissy had spoken once to bid them take the needlework away. "I've done with it," she said. Otherwise she was silent, and only looked at them with gentle, apathetic eyes when they spoke to her. Dr. Grey came and went again. On his way out he noticed Percival, looked keenly at him, but said nothing.

Henry Hardwicke's desire to be useful had prompted him to station himself on the road a short distance from the farm, at the turning from the village. There he stopped people coming to inquire, and gave the latest intelligence. It was weary work, lounging there by the wayside, but he hoped he was serving Sissy Langton to the last. He could not even have a cigar to help to pass the time, for he had an idea that Mrs. Middleton disliked the smell of smoke. He stared at the trees and the sky, drew letters in the dust with the end of a stick, stirred up a small ants' nest, examined the structure of a dog-rose or two and some butter-

cups, and compared the flavors of different kinds of leaves. He came forward as Dr. Grey went by. The doctor stopped to tell him that Miss Langton was certainly weaker. "But she may linger some hours yet," he added; and he was going on his way when a thought seemed to strike him. "Are you staying at the farm?" he asked.

"No: they've enough without me. I'm at the little public-house close by."

"Going there for some luncheon?"

Hardwicke supposed so.

"Can't you get young Thorne to go with you? He looks utterly exhausted."

Hardwicke went off on his mission, but he could not persuade him to stir. "All right!" he said at last: "then I shall bring you something to eat here." Percival agreed to that compromise, and owned afterward that he felt better for the food he had taken.

The slow hours of the afternoon went wearily by. The rector of Fordborough came; Dr. Grey came again; Mrs. Latimer passed two or three times. The sky began to grow red toward the west once more, and the cawing rooks flew homeward, past the window where Percival sat waiting vainly for the summons which did not come.

Hardwicke, released from his self-imposed duty, came to see if Percival would go with him for half an hour or so to the Latimer Arms. "I've got a kind of tea-dinner," he said—"chops and that sort of thing. You'd better have some." But it was of no use. So when he came back to the house the good-natured fellow brought some more provisions, and begged Lucy Greenwell to make some tea, which he carried up.

"Where are you going to spend the night?" asked Harry, coming up again when he had taken away the cup and plate.

"Here," said Percival. He sat with his hands clasped behind his head and one leg drawn up on the seat. His face was sharply defined against the square of sunset sky.

Hardwicke stood with his hands in his pockets, looking down at him. "But you can't sleep here," he said.

"That doesn't matter much. Sleeping or waking, here I stay."

A sudden hope flashed in his eyes, for the door of Sissy's room opened, and, closing it behind her, Mrs. Middleton came out and looked up and down the passage. But she called "Harry" in a low voice, and Percival leant back again.

Harry went. Mrs. Middleton had moved a little farther away, and stood with her back toward Percival and one hand pressed against the wall to steady herself. Her first question was an unexpected one: "Isn't the wind getting up?" Her eyes were frightened and her voice betrayed her anxiety.

"I don't know—not much, I think." He was taken by surprise, and hesitated a little.

"It is: tell me the truth."

"I am—I will," he stammered. "I haven't thought about it. There is a pleasant little breeze, such as often comes in the evening. I don't really think there's any more."

"It isn't rising, then?"

"Wait a minute," said Hardwicke, and hurried off. He did not in the least understand his errand, but it was enough for him that Mrs. Middleton wanted to know. If she had asked him the depth of water in the well or the number of trees on the Priory farm, he would have rushed away with the same eagerness to satisfy her. His voice was heard in the porch, alternating with deeper and less carefully restrained tones. Then there was a sound of steps on the gravel-path. Presently he came back. Mrs. Middleton's attitude was unchanged, except that she had drawn a little closer to the wall. But though she had never looked over her shoulder, she was uneasily conscious of the young man half sitting, half lying in the window-seat behind her.

"Greenwell says it won't be anything," Hardwicke announced. "The glass has been slowly going up all day yesterday and to-day, and it is rising still. He believes we have got a real change in the weather, and that it will keep fine for some time."

"Thank God!" said Mrs. Middleton. "Do you think I'm very mad?"

"Not I," Harry answered in a "theirs-not-to-reason-why" manner.

"A week or two ago," she said, "my poor darling was talking about dying, as you young folks will talk, and she said she hoped she should not die in the night, when the wind was howling round the house. A bitter winter night would be worst of all, she said. It won't be *that*, but I fancied the wind was getting up, and it frightened me to think how one would hear it moaning in this old place. It is only a fancy, of course, but she might have thought of it again lying there."

Hardwicke could not have put it into words, but the fancy came to him too of Sissy's soul flying out into the windy waste of air.

"Of course it is nothing—it is nonsense," said Mrs. Middleton. "But if it might be, as she said, when it is warm and light!—if it might be!" She stopped with a catching in her voice.

Harry, in his matter-of-fact way, offered consolation: "Dear Mrs. Middleton, the sun will rise by four, and Greenwell says there won't be any wind."

"Yes, yes! And she may not remember."

"I hope you have been taking some rest," he ventured to say after a brief silence.

"Yes. I was lying down this afternoon, and Sarah will take part of the night." She paused, and spoke again in a still lower tone: "Couldn't you persuade him to go away?"

"Mr. Thorne?"

She nodded: "I will not have her troubled. I asked her if she would see him again, and she said, 'No.' I wish he would go. What is the use of his waiting there?"

Hardwicke shrugged his shoulders: "It is useless for me to try and persuade him. He won't stir for me."

"I would send for him if she wanted him. But she won't."

"I'll speak to him again if you like," said Harry, "though it won't do any good."

Nor did it when a few minutes later the promised attempt was made. "I

shall stay here," said Percival in a tone which conveyed unconquerable decision, and Hardwicke was silenced. The Greenwells came later, regretting that they had not a room to offer Mr. Thorne, but suggesting the sofa in the parlor or a mattress on the floor somewhere. Percival, however, declined everything with such courteous resolution that at last he was left alone.

Again the night came on, with its shadows and its stillness, and the light burning steadily in the one room. To all outward seeming it was the same as it had been twenty-four hours earlier, but Mrs. Middleton, watching by the bedside, was conscious of a difference. Life was at a lower ebb: there was less eagerness and unrest, less of hope and fear, more of a drowsy acquiescence. And Percival, who had been longed for so wearily the night before, seemed to be altogether forgotten.

Meanwhile, he kept his weary watch outside. He said to himself that he had darkened Sissy's last day: he cursed his cruelty, and yet could he have done otherwise? He was haunted through the long hours of the night by the words which had been ever on his lips when he won her—

If she love me, this believe,
I will die ere she shall grieve;

and he vowed that never was man so forsworn as he. Yet his one desire had been to be true. Had he not worshipped Truth? And this was the end of all.

His cruelty, too, had been worse than useless. He had lost this chance of an independence, as he had lost Brackenhill. He hated himself for thinking of money then, yet he could not help thinking of it—could not help being aware that Sissy's entreaty to him to take her fortune was worth nothing unless a will were made, and that there had been no mention of such a thing since she spoke to him that morning. And he was so miserably poor! Of whom should he borrow the money to take him back to his drudgery at Brenthill? Well, since Sissy no longer cared for his future, it was well that he had spoken. Better poverty than treachery. Let the mon-

ey go; but, oh, to see her once again and ask her to forgive him!

As the night crept onward he grew drowsy and slept by snatches, lightly and uneasily, waking with sudden starts to a consciousness of the window at his side—a loophole into a ghostly sky where shreds of white cloud were driven swiftly before the breeze. The wan crescent of the moon gleamed through them from time to time, showing how thin and phantom-like they were, and how they hurried on their way across the heavens. After a time the clouds and moon and midnight sky were mingled with Percival's dreams, and toward morning he fell fast asleep.

Again Aunt Harriet saw the first gray gleam of dawn. Slowly it stole in, widening and increasing, till the candle-flame, which had been like a golden star shining out into the June night, was but a smoky yellow smear on the saffron morning. She rose and put it out. Turning, she encountered Sissy's eyes. They looked from her to a window at the foot of the bed. "Open," said Sissy.

Mrs. Middleton obeyed. The sound of unfastening the casement awoke Sarah, who was resting in an easy-chair. She sat up and looked round.

The breeze had died away, as Harry had foretold it would, and that day had dawned as gloriously as the two that had preceded it. A lark was soaring and singing—a mere point in the dome of blue.

Sissy lay and looked a while. Then she said, "Brackenhill?"

Aunt Harriet considered for a moment before she replied: "A little to the right, my darling."

The dying eyes were turned a little to the right. Seven miles away, yet the old gray manor-house rose before Aunt Harriet's eyes, warm on its southern slope, with its shaven lawns and whispering trees and the long terrace with its old stone balustrade. Perhaps Sissy saw it too.

"Darling, it is warm and light," the old lady said at last.

Sissy smiled. Her eyes wandered from the window. "Aunt, you promised," she whispered.

"Yes, dear—yes, I promised."

There was a pause. Suddenly, Sissy spoke, more strongly and clearly than she had spoken for hours: "Tell Percival—my love to Miss Lisle."

"Fetch him," said Mrs. Middleton to Sarah, with a quick movement of her hand toward the door. As the old woman crossed the room Sissy looked after her. In less than a minute Percival came in. His dark hair was tumbled over his forehead, and his eyes, though passionately eager, were heavy with sleep. As he came forward Sissy looked up and repeated faintly, like an echo, "My love to Miss Lisle, Percival." Her glance met his and welcomed him. But even as he said "Sissy!" her eyes closed, and when, after a brief interval, they opened again, he was conscious of a change. He spoke and took her hand, but she did not heed. "She does not know me!" he said.

Her lips moved, and Aunt Harriet stooped to catch the faint sound. It was something about "Horry—coming home from school."

Hardly knowing what she said—only longing for one more look, one smile of recognition, one word—Aunt Harriet spoke in painfully distinct tones: "My darling, do you want Horace? Shall we send for Horace?"

No answer. There was a long pause, and then the indistinct murmur recommenced. It was still "Horry," and "Rover," and presently they thought she said "Langley Wood."

"Horace used to take her there for a treat," said Mrs. Middleton.—"Oh, Sissy, don't you know Aunt Harriet?"

Still, from time to time, came the vague murmur of words. It was dark—the trees—she had lost—

Percival stood in silent anguish. There was to him a bitterness worse than the bitterness of death in the sound of those faint words. Sissy was before him, yet she had passed away into the years when she did not know him. He might cry to her, but she would not hear. There was no word for him: the Sissy who had loved him and pardoned him was dead. This was the child Sissy with whom Horace had played at Brackenhill.

The long bright morning seemed an eternity of blue sky, softly rustling leaves, birds singing and golden chequers of sunlight falling on walls and floor. Dr. Grey came in and stood near. The end was at hand, and yet delayed. The sun was high before the faint whispers of "Auntie," and "Horry," ceased altogether, and even then there was an interval during which Sissy still breathed, still lingered in the borderland between living and dying. Eagerly though they watched her, they could not tell the moment when she left them.

It was late that afternoon. Hardwicke lounged with his back against the gate of the orchard and his hands in his pockets. When he lifted his eyes from the turf on which he stood he could see the white blankness of a closed window through the boughs.

He was sorely perplexed. Not ten minutes earlier Mrs. Latimer had been there, saying, "Something should be done: why does not Mr. Thorne go to her? Or could Dr. Grey say anything if he were sent for? I'm sure it isn't right that she should be left so."

Mrs. Middleton was alone with her dead in that darkened room. She was perfectly calm and tearless. She only demanded to be left to herself. Mrs. Latimer would have gone in to cry and sympathize, but she was repulsed with a decision which was almost fierce. Sarah was not to disturb her. She wanted nothing. She wanted nobody. She must be by herself. She was terrible in her lonely misery.

Hardwicke felt that it could not be his place to go. Somewhere in the priory ruins was Percival Thorne, hiding his sorrow and himself: should he find him and persuade him to make the attempt? But Harry had an undefined feeling that Mrs. Middleton did not want Percival.

He stood kicking at a daisy-root in the grass, feeling himself useless, yet unwilling to desert his post, when a hand was pressed on his shoulder and he started round. Godfrey Hammond was on the other side of the gate, looking just as cool and colorless as usual.

"Thank God you're come, Mr. Ham-

mond!" Harry exclaimed, and began to pour out his story in such haste that it was a couple of minutes before Godfrey fully understood him. The new-comer listened attentively, asking a question or two. He brushed some imperceptible dust from his gray coat-sleeve, and sticking his glass in his eye he surveyed the farmhouse.

"I think I should like to see Mrs. Middleton at once," he said when Hardwicke had finished.

Sarah showed him the way, but he preferred to announce himself. He knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" said the voice within.

"It is I, Godfrey Hammond: I may come in?"

"Yes."

He opened the door and saw her sitting by the bedside, where something lay white and straight and still. She turned her head as he entered, then stood up and came a step or two to meet him. "Oh, Godfrey!" she said in a low voice, "she died this morning."

He put his arm about her. "I would have been here before if I could," he said.

"I knew it." She trembled so much that he drew her nearer, supporting her as tenderly as if he were her son, though his face above her was unmoved as ever.

"She died this morning," Mrs. Middleton repeated. She hid her face suddenly and burst into a passion of tears. "Oh, Godfrey! she was hurt so! she was hurt so! Oh my darling!"

"We could not wish her to linger in pain," he said softly.

"No, no. But only this morning, and I feel as if I had been alone for years!"

Still, through her weeping, she clung to him. His sympathy made a faint glimmer of light in the darkness, and her sad eyes turned to it.

CHAPTER LIII.

AFTERWARD.

THERE is little more to write. Four years, with their varying seasons, their endless procession of events, their multitude of joys and sorrows, have passed

since Sissy died. Her place in the world, which seemed so blank and strange in its first vacancy, is closed up and lost in the crowding occupations of our ordinary life. She is not forgotten, but she has passed out of the light of common day into the quiet world of years gone by, where there is neither crowd nor haste, but soft shadows and shadowy sunshine, and time for every tender memory and thought. Even Aunt Harriet's sorrow is patient and subdued, and she sees her darling's face, with other long-lost faces, softened as in a gentle dream. She looks back to the past with no pain of longing. At seventy-eight she believes that she is nearer to those she loves by going forward yet a little farther. Nor are these last days sad, for in her loneliness Godfrey Hammond persuaded her to come to him, and she is happy in her place by his fireside. He is all that is left to her, and she is wrapped up in him. Nothing is good enough for Godfrey, and he says, with a smile, that she would make the planets revolve round him if she could. It is very possible that if she had her will she might attempt some little rearrangement of that kind. Her only fear is lest she should ever be a burden to him. But that will never be. Godfrey likes her delicate, old-fashioned ways and words, and is glad to see the kind old face which smiled on him long ago when he was a lad lighted up with gentle pleasure in his presence now. When he bids her good-night he knows that she will pray before she lies down, and he feels as if his home and he were the better for those simple prayers uttered night and morning in an unbroken sequence of more than seventy years. There is a tranquil happiness in that house, like the short, golden days of a St. Martin's summer or the November blooming of a rose.

In the February after Sissy's death Godfrey went to Rookleigh for a day, to be present at a wedding in the old church where the bridegroom had once lingered idly in the hot summer-time and pictured his marriage to another bride. That summer afternoon was not forgotten. Percival, standing on the un-

even pavement above the Shadwells' vault, remembered his vision of Sissy's frightened eyes even while he uttered the words that bound him to Judith Lisle. But those words were not the less true because the thought of Sissy was hidden in his heart for ever.

Since that day Percival has spent almost all his time abroad, leading such a life as he pictured long ago, only the reality is fairer than the day-dream, because Judith shares it with him. Together they travel or linger as the fancy of the moment dictates. Percival does not own a square yard of the earth's surface, and therefore he is at liberty to wander over it as he will. He is conscious of a curious loneliness about Judith and himself. They have no child, no near relations: it seems as if they were freed from all ordinary ties and responsibilities. His vague aspira-

tions are even less definite than of old; yet, though his life follows a wandering and uncertain track, fair flowers of kindness, tolerance and courtesy spring up by that wayside. Judith and he do not so much draw closer day by day as find ever new similarity of thought and feeling already existing between them. His heart turns to her as to a haven of peace; all his possibilities of happiness are in her hands; he rests in the full assurance that neither deed nor word of hers can ever jar upon him; in his darker moods he thinks of her as clear, still sunlight, and he has no desire apart from her. Yet when he looks back he doubts whether his life can hold another moment so supreme in love and anguish as that moment when he looked into Sissy's eyes for the last time and knew himself forgiven.



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